

The Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

24 February 2023

Dear Minister,

Cuts to the Mathematics and Statistics Department at Birkbeck University

We are writing to you from Protect Pure Maths regarding the future of mathematical sciences and statistics at Birkbeck University.

As you will be aware, there have been reports of significant cuts to teaching staff across the university. The proposed changes are likely to render the Birkbeck degree courses in mathematical sciences and statistics untenable, with up to half of the teaching staff at risk of redundancy.

Universities face ever greater financial pressure from high inflation and a real terms decline in the value of the maximum domestic tuition fee. Due to the pandemic, admission data has been skewed for the last 2-3 years, and the situation is being compounded by not enough funding being allocated, including the remaining £176m of the £300m in additional funding promised by the Government in 2020. This is depriving departments of vital funding whether through PhD studentships or research grants.

The larger mathematics departments at Russell Group universities continue to thrive and grow, but this is leading to the mathematical sciences becoming an almost exclusively high-tariff degree with far fewer lower-tariff, non-traditional options available for those who wish to continue to study beyond A level. This will impact on groups such as mature students or those from more diverse backgrounds.

As London's only specialist provider of evening higher education, Birkbeck has a unique and crucial role in widening participation in higher education. The Birkbeck student body is diverse, including many mature students as well as those who are first in their families to study for a degree. Around 65% of Birkbeck students are from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds.

The UK needs to foster an ongoing flow of talented mathematicians from diverse backgrounds to continue to contribute to social and technical advances in the century ahead. Commitment to doing so is consistent with many government directives, such as the UKRI's intention to 'embed equality, diversity and inclusion'. Mathematics is also one of the most attractive degrees in terms of future earnings with Deloitte calculating the salary premium for advanced maths skills to be around £8,000 a year.

We must therefore encourage more students to study STEM across all key stages including higher education, ensuring a strong pipeline of qualified students for STEM careers. We support the Prime Minister's recent announcement that all students will study mathematics until the age of 18. However, to realise these ambitions there must be university departments ready to take on and develop these students, and train the necessary teachers, including via non-traditional routes to higher education, such as those offered by Birkbeck.

The experiences of mathematics departments at other universities indicate that redundancies such as those reported at Birkbeck often result in 'academic flight'; key grant holders vacate their positions, putting departments at risk and making their survival unlikely. This has already been seen at the University of Leicester, for example, where almost all researchers in Pure Mathematics have left or been made redundant.

We have urged Birkbeck University to reconsider the proposed changes, before irreversible cuts are made, and student education and research impacted.

Given your Government's ambitions for science in the UK, it is critical that the Government signals to universities that mathematics departments, like Birkbeck's, should be invested in rather than denuded. Without this commitment, your aspirations for STEM in this country will be undermined.

We are concerned that the decisions like those made at Birkbeck are being replicated at other institutions and we are keen to meet with you at the earliest opportunity to discuss how this may be prevented. Please contact us via Claudia Toma at puremaths@connectpa.co.uk to arrange this.

Yours sincerely,

Protect Pure Maths www.protectpuremaths.uk

Professor Ulrike Tillmann, President of the London Mathematical Society

Professor Paul Glendinning, President of the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications

Professor Iain Gordon, Vice President of the London Mathematical Society