

Britain: Universities slash jobs, close campuses

Robert Stevens
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Universities in the UK have begun to slash staff and new student numbers, wind up courses and even close whole campuses as the impact of government cuts takes hold.

The *Guardian* this week ran a report based on interviews with vice-chancellors and senior staff at 25 universities affected by budget cuts totalling nearly £1 billion. For the upcoming academic year alone, the spending reductions, announced last week by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, is £449 million. This represents a cut in university budgets of more than five percent.

With universities accounting for about £15 billion of public spending, the announced cuts will slash funding by nearly 6.7 percent. However, this is only the first instalment, with the Institute of Fiscal Studies warning that eventual cuts could total £2.5 billion.

The *Guardian* reports states, “Professor Michael Arthur, vice-chancellor of Leeds University, warned that budgets would be further slashed by 6 percent in each of the next three years.”

Universities are implementing the cuts even prior to knowing the exact funding is for each institution. This breakdown is to be released on March 18.

Thousands of mainly academic jobs are to be lost over the next few years, according to the University and College Union (UCU). The union estimates that more than 15,000 jobs will be lost. Job cuts being planned include more than 200 at King’s College, London; 150 at the University of Westminster; 340 at Sheffield Hallam; 300 at Hull; and up to 700 at the University of Leeds.

At Leeds, the number of professors in biological sciences is being reduced from 48 to 40. Lecturers there have voted to strike. Other institutions where strike ballots are being held or are pending include King’s

College London; the University of the Arts; Sussex University; and the University of Gloucestershire.

Universities are being forced to slash their budgets amidst a record demand for places from young people. With unemployment among 18-25 year olds standing at nearly one million, up to 300,000 applicants are likely to miss out on a place this autumn. The number of places available has been reduced to 2008 levels. The *Guardian* cited the example of Edge Hill University in Lancashire, where applications are up by 42 percent.

According to figures released this week by UCAS, the university admissions service, applications for a place at university for 2010/11 already total more than 570,000. This represents an increase of more than 100,000 from the same period in 2009, with a further four months of applications still to be counted. UK applicants are up 22.1 percent, while overseas applicants are up 28.7 percent, from 55,245 to 71,105.

The Open University, Britain’s largest university by enrolment, is also making cuts. These include the loss by hundreds of students of access to a fee discount scheme.

A number of campuses are being closed, including sites at Cumbria and Wolverhampton universities. Students will be forced to transfer to other sites. At Cumbria, one in seven academic positions, 200 out of 1,400, are to be lost.

The building of new facilities has been shelved at a number of institutions. These include a £25 million creative arts building at Worcester and a £12 million science block at Hertfordshire.

The cuts will severely impact the ability of poorer students to enrol. At Teesside University, £2 million in scholarships and bursaries for low-income students may be ended. The university “will also share services with a further education college in Darlington,” said the

Guardian.

Courses being dropped include a number in the arts and humanities. At the University of the West of England, courses in French, German and Spanish have ended, and at Surrey, a BA in humanities has also been ditched.

Specialised areas of study and research are also being hit by cuts that will have ramifications for decades to come. At Kings College, London, palaeography, the study and deciphering of ancient manuscripts, will not be taught as a separate subject from August. Kings College, London is the UK's only chair of palaeography.

The importance of such investigation is evidenced by the more than more than 4,000 members of a Facebook page set up to demand that Kings restore the position. Dr. Mary Beard, professor of classics at Cambridge University, said, "It's not as if we can come back to it in 15 years' time if we then decide there's enough money. Palaeography can't be taught in an online tutorial; it's a skill handed down from one academic to another. If King's does go through with its decision, it's the end of the subject in this country."

One of the vice-chancellors, Professor Chris Jenks of Brunel University, noted that the cuts were a precursor to universities becoming more heavily reliant on private funding. He commented, "I don't think that private higher education is a good or advisable model, but for a number of years successive governments have been trying to wean [us] off the state purse both in research and teaching."

As is the case with lecturers and other university staff, the cuts will undoubtedly lead to widespread opposition among students. This week, more than 100 students at the University of Sussex began an occupation of the conference centre and held a rally in opposition to plans to slash 115 jobs and to cut courses in a bid to save £3 million this academic year and £5 million next year.

The cuts being imposed by the Labour government have won effusive praise from the right-wing media. Writing in the *Times* this week, Andrew Haldenby of the free-market think tank Reform and a former head of the Political Section of the Conservative Research Department, lauded the cuts as a step in the eventual privatisation of higher education.

Haldenby commented that politicians from "Lord

Mandelson [Labour government business secretary] down have announced that budgets will be cut by hundreds of millions of pounds, with the number of places frozen and universities having to make more of the resources that they have.

"It was the right thing to do, given the size of the budget deficit, which all parties have pledged to tackle to maintain economic credibility."

Haldenby said that cuts were an "absolutely reasonable idea that any organisation in a funding crisis should consider." He continued, "There is a warning about 'campus closures,' but many universities—like many schools—make very poor use of their estates. They should be closing some facilities and getting more value out of others."

He then got to the crux of his argument—that higher education must not be seen as a right for all. Speaking about the expansion of student numbers in the last decade in Britain, he said it had "allowed the idea to emerge that university education is an entitlement rather than a meritocratic achievement."

Haldenby called for a solution in which institutions "raise more of their revenues privately, whether from tuition fees or alumni." He continued, "We need more of the big fundraising appeals launched by Oxford and Cambridge. We need more plans to establish private universities."

He concluded by calling for a "genuine market in higher education," which "would allow the number of places to rise if there is demand for them. And such a free market would also build on the introduction of tuition fees—one of new Labour's greatest achievements."



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