

Britain: Dartington College of Arts to close

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Dartington College of Arts, a small academic institution in Devon, England, will close this autumn. Its 610 students and 30 staff are to be absorbed into the larger University College Falmouth (UCF), 86 miles away in Cornwall. The closure was prepared in anticipation of large cuts to universities, £900 million of which were announced by the Labour government this month.

Situated by fourteenth century Dartington Hall and Gardens, the college is a valuable resource with a specialised library, postgraduate research and practice-led teaching. It was set up in 1961 during a wave of university expansion, in a town that has been a cultural centre since the 1920s. The college is fiercely popular with students for its close-knit community and picturesque surroundings.

The Quality Assurance Agency, which audits universities in Britain, recently reported that the college has high quality teaching and several areas of exemplary practice. The college has been well managed, with stable finances. It was being refurbished up until recently, with £6 million already invested in new studios.

News of a possible closure became public in 2006 when a press leak revealed that two years of secret talks had taken place between college bosses and the landlord, Dartington Hall Trust. The decision to close was made final in December that year and the college merged with UCF the following March.

The immediate cause for the closure is a lack of funding to renovate accommodation facilities. A similar fate faces many small or specialised higher education institutions after decades of underinvestment. Daniel Cook, former president of Dartington Students' Union, said, "Nearly all our residential blocks are in a state of

squalor. We are the very first casualty of the marketisation of education."

The new principal brought in to oversee the closure rode roughshod over public opinion, rushing through the proceedings in order to meet deadlines for European Union funding for relocation to Cornwall, which receives aid due to its weak economy. Students and faculty were not consulted. One tutor with 30 years experience at the college was sacked for penning a satirical article critical of the bosses' authoritarianism.

The closure will be a blow to the local community, who have attended cultural events and developed ties with the college over its 50 year history. According to Devon County Council, the surrounding Totnes area will be deprived of the £5 million that the college draws to its struggling rural economy, doubly felt after the recent closure of the Dairy Crest milk depot destroyed 164 jobs.

Students can expect their courses to change or be dropped when they are relocated to Falmouth. There is a shortage of accommodation at the new location, and many are struggling to make living arrangements.

There is widespread public opposition to the planned closure. In January 2007 over 1,000 students, staff and local residents held a demonstration in Totnes Civic Square demanding the college remain open. Alumni travelled from around Europe to support the demonstration, recognising that attacks to education are affecting students in all counties. Karan Braun, a German former student said, "Small colleges all over Europe are being closed. This is a European wide issue, and we must fight to save Dartington."

Leading artists have called for the preservation of Dartington College. Director Peter Brook called it

“more than a priceless institution, it is a living, evolving presence.” Composer Gavin Bryars, Associate Research Fellow at Dartington, warned that the relocation “will mean the death of the college and all it has stood for and do not be deceived into thinking otherwise.” He is “horrified that the idea of uprooting one of the healthiest and most vigorous educational environments should ever have been considered and I cannot imagine that this is for educational reasons.”

Initiatives to generate funds to save the college received curt snubs from unelected officials. A plan to build new accommodation was waved aside by the college executive. The European Commissioner for Regional Policy ignored any letters of protest, as did the Regional Development Agency.

The National Union of Students maintained its silence, demonstrating the Labour-controlled body’s tacit support for the destruction of the college and all the attacks being made on education. The local Dartington College Students’ Union leader, Daniel Cooke, supported the closure once it became a *fait accompli*, and standing shoulder to shoulder with the college Principal began sugaring the pill for relocation to Cornwall. A statement supposedly justifying his stance unintentionally read more like a pledge of loyalty to the authorities, which concluded, “I have done nothing malicious, nothing wrong and nothing that is unrepresentative and I never will.”

The University and College Union and Unite, representing lecturers and staff respectively, issued a meek statement against the closure, offering no fight.

The Save Dartington College Campaign states that CalArts, a US university owned by The Walt Disney Company, plans to establish a private music college on the Dartington site.



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