

Scotland: Savage education cuts imminent

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Recent reports have warned that Scottish universities will lose up to 20 percent of the £1.12 billion they currently receive in public funding. The Scottish Funding Council intimated that funding for Scotland's 20 universities would fall by 0.6 percent in 2010-2011, and by at least 3.2 percent in each of the following three academic years.

Across Britain some 7,000 education jobs are estimated to be under threat this summer alone.

In Scotland, huge public spending cuts are already being set in motion. Professor David Bell, adviser to the Scottish Financial Committee, has forecast cuts of 20 percent. The chief economic adviser to the Scottish government, Dr. Andrew Goudie, has indicated that the future of free universal benefits such as paid tuition fees, prescriptions, eye tests and school meals must all be considered as legitimate targets for cost saving.

The Centre for Public Policy for Regions at Glasgow University has advised that this period will require strong leadership to "make the unpalatable seem inevitable" and keep a lid on social unrest.

Documents leaked to the press reveal that Glasgow Caledonian University is set to lose 15 percent of its funding. The University of Aberdeen and the University of the West of Scotland both expect a 15 percent cut, with the University of Abertay planning for a 12 percent cut.

The University of Glasgow has initiated a cost-cutting operation under the guise of a modernisation programme, which will see the nine current faculties reduced to four colleges with an as yet undetermined number of jobs at risk.

A spokeswoman revealed that the university is currently pursuing "a limited and targeted programme of downsizing in some non-core university business, as well as a small number of academic areas where costs are currently exceeding income".

This process mirrors the rationalisation of education across Britain, as determined by the demands of big

business and finance capital. Those faculties that have no use to the market are systematically being closed or starved of resources. Philosophy departments at several institutions have been targeted. Both undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Middlesex University are to be terminated. This follows other attacks on Philosophy at King's College London and Liverpool, both of which are currently unresolved.

At the University of Glasgow, 24 jobs have already been targeted within the faculty of education in response to the 40 percent reduction in teacher training places, scheduled by the Scottish government for next year. A further 80 jobs are to be cut on top of those that have already taken place through retirement and the non-renewal of staff contracts.

Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division is set to be closed completely, threatening the loss of 30 academic positions. The faculty of Biomedical and Life Sciences is looking to make redundancies to address its £1.2 million budget deficit. Eighteen positions are at risk.

On May 19, 200 students, academic and administrative staff held a demonstration and handed in a petition to the university principal, Anton Muscatelli, in opposition to the cuts in Biomedical and Life Sciences. Previously, Muscatelli has been an adviser to the World Bank and the European Commission, as well as chair of the Research and Commercialisation Committee of Universities Scotland, a grouping of 20 leading Scottish universities.

On top of budgetary cuts, eight Scottish universities are planning a reduction in student numbers. The two largest reductions are planned by Aberdeen and Glasgow Caledonian University, at 18.4 and 13 percent respectively. Cuts are also planned at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, and Stirling University.

This comes at a time when demand for higher education is rapidly expanding as the labour market shrinks and unemployment rises. Applications to Scottish Universities are up 31 percent on last year. Thousands are set to be turned away from higher education to join the dole

queues.

Increased demand for places is also stretching Scotland's 43 colleges and has resulted in a vast reduction of the January intake. Clydebank has reduced student places from 947, down from last year's total of 1,919. Telford College, in Edinburgh, has reduced intake from 1,460 to 1,033. Colleges in Inverness, Dundee, Fife, Motherwell, Edinburgh, Dumfries and Galloway have also reduced January intake, and it has been cut altogether at Aberdeen.

Heightened demand has put a huge strain on student support budgets, which will inevitably deprive the poorest layers of society of a college education, and thus also the opportunity of a university education.

This is being authorised by the trade unions. The University and College Union (UCU) immediately adapted itself to the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. It has described the Liberal Democrats as their "new political partners", while General Secretary Sally Hunt stated, "The new government has a unique opportunity to build a national consensus that puts education at the heart of our recovery".

In response to the membership's increasing criticism and dissatisfaction with the absence of any serious industrial action, the UCU called "a day of action" on May 5. Those involved included University College London, King's College London, University of Westminster, and the University of Sussex, as well as 11 further education colleges.

Launched in partnership with other trade unions Unite, Unison, GMB and the Education Institute of Scotland, the campaign's stated aim is to establish a national agreement on job security with the Universities and Colleges Employment Association (UCEA), which has already been repeatedly rejected.

Despite this partnership of unions having a collective membership of more than 4.2 million covering every industrial, occupational and professional sector of the British economy, the UCU has offered only sporadic and uncoordinated one-day stoppages that remain confined to the education sector. In reality, its aim is to systematically dissipate the opposition of teachers, staff and students and enable the UCU to re-establish a working partnership with the UCEA. It states: "A campaign should attempt to build the maximum possible unity between all stakeholders—unions, students, learned societies and Higher Education employers".

In recent disputes over university employee pensions,

the UCU has shown its willingness to trade employee benefits in order to maintain this partnership at all costs. In a recent press release, the union despaired that the UCEA had not accepted its "goodwill" and very "affordable proposals" consisting of heightened employee contributions, "an increased retirement age for new entrants and a cost sharing mechanism should future increases be required".

The role of the trade union bureaucracy has been replicated by student representative bodies on campuses across the UK. The state-funded National Union of Students has openly campaigned against industrial action.

In Glasgow, the University Students' Representative Council (GUSRC) is working to isolate student opposition to the cutbacks by confining its campaign to the Faculty of Biomedical and Life Sciences (FBLS). The GUSRC is pressuring the university "to find the money to fund the FBLS deficit from elsewhere". This is an attempt to pit student against student, faculty against faculty, in competition for a decreasing amount of public funding, and is consistent with the drive to rationalise education.

The recently established National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts ostensibly calls for a unified struggle against conditions faced by staff and students. However, it remains entirely subordinate to the trade union bureaucracy and the NUS. Its website links to UCU and Unison from the front page. The organisation's Facebook page notes that the next steering committee meeting intends to discuss "plans for affiliation with trade unions", while one of the principal aims of its founding conventions was simply to run "a united anti-cuts slate in the NUS".

By necessity, any struggle must make a clear break with the trade union bureaucracy and all organisations that seek to subordinate opposition to various factions of the ruling elite.



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