

Glasgow University principal proposes cuts and rationalisations

Stephen Alexander
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On May 28, the principal of the University of Glasgow, Anton Muscatelli, briefed students on the strategic priorities and direction of the university in the face of the global economic crisis.

Muscatelli's briefing was organised in response to recent protests over the announcement of 80 jobs to be cut across the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Biomedical and Life Sciences (FBLS) and the closure of the Archaeological Research Division. On May 19, as part of the Student Representative Council led "Don't Kill Science!" campaign to oppose cuts to the FBLS, 200 students and staff held a demonstration and handed a petition of 2,118 signatures to the principal. On the same day, more than 300 lecturers joined an emergency meeting and voted unanimously to ballot for industrial action.

In his address, Muscatelli justified the downsizing of the university in the face of imminent public spending cuts in Britain. He underlined that the university is currently planning for cuts of between 15 and 20 percent in light of the £50-60 billion estimated to be cut from public spending in Britain between now and 2014-15. Such cuts, which he described as "relatively small scale to what might happen in the future", would reduce the current £1.12 billion in Scotland's higher education budget by around £200 million.

Students were informed that in the meantime, the FBLS had taken steps to tackle the departmental deficit of £1.2 million, in line with a July 31 deadline set by the university court. The deficit now stood at £507,000, with a projected cut of 9 academic positions, down from 18. This was achieved by diverting costs to other parts of the university.

Muscatelli sought to distinguish these immediate cuts from a restructuring programme that began in the last quarter of 2009. Presented as bringing Glasgow in line

with the world's top 50 universities, by boosting postgraduate numbers and research capability, the restructuring programme is a rationalisation drive. Nine current faculties are to be reduced to four colleges, wiping out an as yet unknown number of administrative and teaching posts.

In response to concerns raised by students over the impact of this on undergraduate and postgraduate education, Muscatelli argued that the university must adapt.

He later clarified what this would mean, stating, "I can't tell you today where it's going to hurt, but what I can tell you today is, when we find out the actual extent of those cuts, we will work together with all staff and the student body to see how we can best do this".

Rejecting this, one student at the meeting commented, "If you're not going to know which staff are going to be missing, how are you going to make sure that there will be people to cover? You can't actually ensure it's going to be of the same quality".

The cost-cutting measures across higher education in Britain will result in a deterioration of an already stretched service, leading to higher workloads for both teaching and administrative staff, greater dependence on graduate teaching assistants, increased seminar class sizes, and an overall deterioration in research in all those areas that are not of optimum importance to big business.

Muscatelli has no intention of safeguarding higher education. His primary concern is in representing the profit interests of Scotland's financial and corporate elite. In 2007-2008, he chaired the Research and Commercialisation Committee for Universities Scotland, a lobby group consisting of the principals and directors of Universities Scotland, which Muscatelli now chairs.

A 2009 report by Universities Scotland, “What Was/What Next?”, argued that the distribution of public funding, and the organisation of education, should be calculated on the basis of what yields the greatest profitability. It advised that funding should be focused upon fostering a high-tech industries-based economy, requiring investment in high skill and high innovation mainly at the postgraduate level. It argued that funding on much needed infrastructure, and primary and secondary education, would not give the desired return on investment. It opposed protecting jobs within static or rapidly decreasing sectors such as manufacture, construction and retail.

The report warned starkly that the required labour market of the future will be polarized: “The skills needs of the future will be at the highest and lowest levels; there will be little demand for intermediate vocational level skills”.

With a huge reduction in intake projected across Scotland at higher education institutions, as large as 18.4 percent at Glasgow Caledonian, a university education will become even more the preserve of an elite few. This will be exacerbated once the major political parties have hurdled the 2011 Scottish parliamentary election, when unpaid university fees will become a target for cost saving.

At the same time, the vast majority of the population will be educated for the lowest skilled and most miserable jobs in the labour market.

Muscatelli has personally seen tremendous material gain from the increasing commercialization of higher education under the Labour government.

In 2008-2009, then principal of Herriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, he received a 24.3 percent pay rise, taking his salary from £160,000 to £199,000, while he pushed for an agreement of 50 voluntary redundancies to address the university’s deficit in 2008. A survey by Glasgow’s *Herald* newspaper indicated that Muscatelli is now the third highest paid principal in Scotland, with a combined salary package of £283,000.

When challenged by students on senior management pay levels, Muscatelli answered, “I am not in the habit of talking about my salary in public spaces like this”.

He cynically pledged to donate 5 percent of his salary in a one-off payment toward the FBLS faculty deficit. When again challenged over pay toward the end of the

meeting, he retorted, “I’m sorry, I don’t believe in a world where everybody earns the minimum wage”.

Muscatelli underscored the fact that students and teachers really have no recourse to oppose these cuts through any of the main political parties. “No matter, actually, which of the main political party manifestos you read, before the election, all of them pretty much had similar plans for addressing the deficit”, he said.

The president of the Student Representative Council, Laura Laws, in attendance at the meeting, nodded constantly throughout Muscatelli’s address. She hailed the meeting as “a really positive step forward”.

“I think this is the way forward, this is the way to engage, to keep that trust going, keeping students having a say in their education”, she said.

In response to the May ballot for industrial action by teachers at the University of Glasgow, the Universities and Colleges Union are attempting to mobilise teachers on the basis that the university’s economic case for cuts is spurious and has no basis. This only serves to isolate the opposition of staff and students in a localised appeal to management to reconsider the redundancies it plans to make as against a united national campaign directed against government on the basis of a socialist programme.



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