

UK's Open University to be decimated, as more jobs are eliminated

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Britain's largest academic institution, the Open University (OU), has announced plans to drastically slash the numbers of academics it employs and greatly reduce the number of courses available for distance learning.

Hundreds of jobs are threatened, in what the vice-chancellor making the cuts, Peter Horrocks, described as “the largest restructuring redundancy programme ever in UK university history.”

The cuts will decimate a public resource that has been utilized by thousands of mature, working class and overseas students who could not otherwise train or become better qualified.

Last summer, the OU announced that government cuts to funding demanded savings of £100 million from its £420 million annual budget. The OU has more than 170,000 students enrolled, 1,000 academic and research staff, and over 2,500 administrative, operational and support staff.

During the last week of the recent and ongoing lecturers' strike over pension cuts, which involved staff at more than 60 universities, management announced plans to slash 220 teaching staff in the University of Liverpool.

Redundancies in FE continued to be pushed through, with the Hull College Group—who provide FE colleges in Hull, Goole and Harrogate—proposing redundancies for 230 lecturers, almost one-third of the teaching staff. University and College Union members at the Hull College Group are being balloted for strike action over the coming weeks.

According to the *Guardian*, confidential documents reveal the scale of the cuts to be made at the OU—with staff told they have only until early April to accept “voluntary” redundancy. The report uses management-speak like “focusing,” “rationalisation” and

“consolidation” rather than “redundancy” and “offering less education” to describe the fundamental changes being proposed.

The number of OU courses, qualifications and modules available to students is to be cut by at least a half. More than 40 undergraduate courses and postgraduate degree courses are to be axed, leaving only around 70 courses available. Courses to be sacrificed will fall from within departments teaching science, business and music.

The devastating OU cuts would mean an end to the education reform carried out in 1969 by Harold Wilson's Labour government to provide tertiary education for the working class. In its near 50 years of existence, almost 2 million British and international students have been able to gain qualifications studying with the OU.

In its early days, the OU was renowned for novel and inventive ways of successfully teaching science—to students based at home, for example. The Conservative governments of Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher in the 1970s and 1980s attempted to cut resources to OU, as they were opposed to its egalitarian ethos, but were opposed by students.

Over recent decades, course content has been allowed to atrophy, with staff overworked and burdened with additional administrative measures and reduced budgets.

The atmosphere prevailing at the OU was illustrated by a letter to the *Guardian* from a member of staff who noted, “Where voices of opposition have been raised, senior faculty staff are pressured to keep quiet (and not to support the pension strike). With an ever-present threat of redundancies, others are simply fearful of speaking out in public.”

The letter continues, “Disquiet with the direction of

change and incompetent management has seen innumerable departures of senior staff under Peter Horrocks' tenure. ... The current leadership oversaw the disastrous closure of regional OU centres and the chaotic introduction of the group tuition policy, all against warnings from experienced academics."

University workers will see no struggle waged by the University and College Union (UCU) or any of the education unions against any of the cuts and job losses being proposed. The union has not lifted a finger against the drive to privatize education in HE and FE over the last decade, and is currently attempting to sell out the struggle of its university members who are opposing huge attacks on the Universities Superannuation Scheme pension scheme.

A spokesperson for the UCU said, "The proposals under discussion would destroy the OU as we know it, turning it from a world-leading distance education university into a digital content provider," but offered no proposals to oppose this.

As the Liverpool cuts were announced, UCU regional official Martyn Moss said only, "We are seeking more information on what exactly this will mean for staff and students at the University of Liverpool."

The role of the unions as adjuncts of management is seen in their role in the planned destruction of jobs at the University of Portsmouth. The university lost £4.5 million income in 2018/19 and is set to lose at least the same again this year as the result of a freeze on undergraduate tuition fees. Applications from 18-year-olds to the university dropped by 3,220, down to 13,620, between 2014 and 2017. In response, management declared that the university is in a fight based on "competitive student recruitment" and demanded that departments find savings of 5 to 7 percent or take measures to boost income.

Last Friday, staff received an email signed jointly by Vice-Chancellor Professor Graham Galbraith, the UCU's vice-chair Phil Verrill and the Unison union branch chair Chris Burke-Hynes. The email, published by the *Portsmouth News*, outlined a redundancy scheme being sent to all 2,500 staff. It stated, "We need to respond to the sector challenges and to seek to create opportunities from them so that our long-term strength and sustainability is secured. Against this background, the university is working in partnership with UCU and Unison to develop a voluntary severance scheme which

could be offered to all staff."

The email continued, "It would seem that there are some staff who would like to take the opportunity of leaving the university if this could be achieved through a mutually agreed financial package."

Justifying the job losses to local UCU members, Branch Secretary Dr. James Hicks stated, "I think all universities are looking to make the kinds of savings that Portsmouth is looking to make.

"When the details of the scheme come out then we'll deal with the enquiries that members may have about their specific concerns. I believe it's a wider sector problem. Portsmouth is in a better position than a lot of other universities."

According to the *Portsmouth News* the job cuts scheme is being promoted by the UCU on the basis that it will be available to all staff and not just a select number! It reported that Hicks "said the scheme was different from redundancies and it would allow all staff to apply—with their applications to leave then considered by bosses."

The UCU will act no differently anywhere else in imposing the diktats of management.

The Socialist Equality Party and Education FightBack are holding an online and call-in forum today, April 10, to discuss these vital issues. We urge teachers, lecturers, academic and FE staff and students to attend.

Education FightBack forum

Tuesday, April 10, 7:30 p.m.

To participate in the meeting, visit <http://bit.ly/efb100418> when the meeting begins, or call +44 330 221 0088 and enter access code 274-739-237.



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