

UK universities prepare all-out assault on staff and students in wake of pandemic

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Mass redundancies and attacks on staff pay and conditions are being planned by universities across the UK as the COVID-19 pandemic tips already struggling institutions into financial collapse.

Universities could see a funding shortfall of £2.5 billion, with around 60,000 jobs on the line, according to research conducted by policy consultant London Economics for the University and College Union (UCU). Thirty thousand of these jobs will likely be axed in the university sector, with a further 30,000 jobs wiped out in local communities.

Much of the lost income is due to plummeting international student enrolments. According to the UCU report, an estimated 47 percent drop in international student numbers will cost the university sector £1.5 billion in the next academic year.

Another £612 million in losses will come from a 16 percent drop in domestic enrolment, as students defer their studies. A further £350 million will be lost due to an estimated 47 percent fall in European Union student recruitment.

Almost three-quarters of universities will be left in a “critical financial position where income only just covers expenditure”, the report states, with all higher education institutions affected in some way.

International students make up nearly a fifth of the UK student population and contribute £7 billion in fees to universities each year. At some universities, up to a quarter or even a third of students are from overseas. In the 2017-18 academic year, 458,490 non-UK students were studying in Britain, 325,665 of these from outside the EU.

Students from overseas can pay up to nine times more in fees than domestic or EU students, whose tuition costs are capped at an already sky-high £9,250 a year. Non-UK/EU students can pay up to £26,000 a year for their university education (plus living costs), or up to £56,800 for some medical degrees.

Some universities expect an 80-100 percent drop in the number of international students enrolling this year, according to a blog post from the Higher Education Policy

Institute (HEPI). For some institutions, the potential loss of income is expected to be more than £100 million.

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the university sector, which contributes more than £95 billion to the UK economy each year and employs nearly a million workers, will likely lead to a £6 billion hit to the British economy.

The fall in domestic and international student enrolments is having a devastating effect on UK universities due to their overwhelming dependence on tuition fee income, as central government funding into higher education has been cut to the bone.

Between 2011-12 and 2019-20, central government spending on higher education teaching in England fell by 74 percent, according to government figures.

In the same period, the ratio of government funding to tuition fee income was reversed. In 2011-12, direct government funding to universities in England made up 72 percent of total income, with tuition fees contributing the remaining 28 percent. By comparison, 27.6 percent of university income came from the government funding council in 2019-20, with 72.4 percent coming from student tuition fees.

Government investment in university teaching has nearly halved in less than a decade. Total government funding in England fell by £3 billion in the eight years between 2011-12 and 2019-20, dropping from £6.7 billion a year to a mere £3.7 billion.

Now, in response to the coronavirus, universities are determined to accelerate long-planned attacks on their workforce. Higher education centres across the country are bringing forward mass lay-offs, pay freezes and course reductions.

At the end of March and the start of April, the University of Sussex, the University of Bristol and the University of Newcastle laid off hundreds of temporary staff and cancelled contracts, citing the impact of coronavirus.

In May, the University of Roehampton became the first UK university to announce job losses affecting permanent staff, as part of a supposedly “voluntary” severance scheme.

The university, which has already lost £4 million, is predicting a reduction in income of up to £31 million and will lay off 70 members of staff on permanent contracts.

Other universities have announced job cuts and pay reductions:

- The President and Vice-President of **Manchester University** have laid out plans to “reduce pay costs” by freezing recruitment, deferring pay awards due to promotions and offering unpaid “voluntary” leave or retirement. “Job losses may also be required”, an email to staff stated.

- The **University of Portsmouth** has announced plans to cut 11 members of staff in their English Literature department.

- The **University of Nottingham** has announced a “voluntary” redundancy scheme and proposed a freeze on pay increments, promotions and recruitment.

- **Oxford University** has announced a 12-month hiring freeze and the “redeployment” of some existing staff across other roles.

- **Edinburgh University** has proposed a pay freeze for current workers and a block on any new recruitment. Many staff members will be furloughed under the government’s Job Retention Scheme.

- **Durham University** has announced it will slash face-to-face teaching by 25 percent from September and outsource some online teaching to a private provider.

In response to these historic financial losses and proposed attacks on university workers, the UCU pathetically pleaded with the Johnson government to “stand behind” universities and to “[underwrite] funding lost from the fall in student numbers”.

These dismal appeals have fallen on deaf ears, with the Johnson government refusing to allocate a single penny in additional funding. Instead, a misnamed “support package” will bring forward £2.6 billion worth of tuition fees (paid by the government as a loan to students) which universities would have received anyway and £100 million in advances on research grants to universities.

Labour and Conservative governments have worked for decades to transform higher education into a lucrative market for private financial interests. Tuition fees were introduced and then tripled by Labour in 1998 and 2004. The Tories drove up tuition fees to £9,250 a year, scrapped maintenance grants for poorer students, and abolished the cap on student numbers to make universities more reliant on fee income.

Staff pay has dropped by 17 percent since 2009, with over half (54 percent) of academic staff on insecure contracts. Short-term and zero- or variable-hour contracts proliferate.

In 2017, the Higher Education and Research Act

established the Office for Students (OfS), whose mandate was to act as a “market regulator” and “competition authority,” enforcing market pressures on the higher education system. This resulted in the incentivisation of universities to engage in wasteful and corrosive competition for student numbers and private sources of income.

The subordination of higher education to the capitalist market has created a disaster, with Alistair Jarvis, chief executive of Universities UK recently warning that without massive government support, “There is a very significant chance of some institutions going bust”.

Students and staff have systematically opposed the gutting of public education. In 2018, lecturers at 65 universities struck in defence of pensions, while a 14-day walkout in February and March this year—to defend pensions, pay and conditions—was the largest strike in UK higher education history.

While the strike movement was effectively ended by the coronavirus lockdown, politically the UCU had already made clear its intention to sabotage any genuine fight. On March 5, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady stated that “We have made it crystal clear to employers that we are not inflexible... we have extended an olive branch to employers by offering to compromise on some of the demands which we started our industrial action with.”

University staff and students must reject all demands for “sacrifice” by the Johnson government, university management and the UCU. The defence of pay, jobs and conditions, including workplace safety, demands the formation of rank-and-file committees to oppose the marketisation of education and fight for socialist policies including free education for all.



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