

UK universities cut arts, languages, humanities and social science degrees

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8 July 2021

Universities in England are threatening a huge wave of course closures in the arts, languages, humanities and social sciences, derided by the Tory government as “dead-end courses”.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported on the University of Sheffield’s intention to close its Department of Archaeology, drawing opposition from staff and students. The decision that the department did not provide “value for money” came as the government is considering plans which would allow it to take more direct control of which courses receive funding.

Course cuts are bound up with the marketisation of higher education which has escalated after the passage of the Higher Education and Research Act in 2017, under which the Office for Students (OfS) was mandated to “encourage competition between English higher education providers” and “promote value for money”. As higher education becomes a marketplace with brutal competition to recruit students and cut costs, universities are enacting corporate-style restructuring plans, targeting “uneconomic” courses and jobs.

Since the first wave of the pandemic, universities have made redundant over 3,000 staff on temporary contracts, and have carried through or announced hundreds of job cuts among academic and office staff. These plans have met only token opposition from the University and College Union (UCU), which demands only that job losses be made “voluntarily”.

Initial attempts to cut costs on existing courses have developed into the wholesale closure of the many arts and humanities courses which are not among the government’s announced “strategic priorities.” OfS guidance sets out plans to halve the annual subsidy paid for these courses, from £40 million to £20 million, and eliminate the additional £64 million in funding which supports courses in London. Replacement grants totalling £10 million have been provided only to 11 “world-

leading” prestigious arts institutions.

Along with the closure of archaeology in Sheffield, many universities are cutting English, history and language courses.

The University of Cumbria announced in May that it would not be running its English course for the coming academic year due to low enrolment. The University of Chester is threatening job cuts in the departments of archaeology, music, and performing arts, as well as engineering.

The University of Hull has begun to close its modern languages courses, not accepting any new students for the coming academic year, and has announced that part-time language courses are likely to be replaced by the “Rosetta Stone” language app. Aston University is to close its Department of History, Languages and Translation to new students from September 2022, threatening the loss of multiple courses and 24 jobs.

Last year the University of the Arts London announced the closure of its Drama Centre London, calling its funding “unsustainable”. The University of London has also announced that it will close the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and the Institute of Latin American Studies.

Universities have taken advantage of the pandemic to force through many of these changes, but the cuts are driven by a deep-rooted assault on higher education. The ruling class views expanded access to science and culture as an intolerable encroachment on the wealth of the oligarchy. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson set out the government’s vision in February, stating, “we need universities and colleges to work together to address the gaps in our labour market,” orienting government spending entirely towards providing an exploitable workforce for a growing digital technology sector and financial services industry.

While these plans are advanced with rhetoric about

degrees providing “value” for graduates by increasing their potential income, the reality is that there will be more students for so-called “high value” degree subjects than there are corresponding jobs, forcing down the relatively high pay in these high-tech sectors. In addition, everything will be done to push the cost of this education and training onto individual students.

Graduates currently pay 9 percent of any income above £26,575 towards their student loan repayments for 30 years after graduating. A recent report from the Higher Education Policy Institute think-tank, headed by a former government adviser, proposes that the government could save around £4 billion in loan write-offs by reducing the repayment threshold to £19,000, costing even many of the lowest-earning graduates thousands of pounds.

A reduction of the tuition fee cap from £9,250 to £7,500 was proposed in the Augar Review of Post-18 Education and Funding in 2018, but it has nothing to do with reducing the massive debt burden of most graduates. It notes that the government currently has “very limited control over the substantial taxpayer investment in higher education” since the universities receive tuition fees directly. The review proposed replacing lost tuition income by direct funding of subjects, giving the government a financial leash with which to enforce its reactionary, philistine agenda.

University senior management teams, whose enormous salaries make them closer to corporate executives than academics, have not waited for direct government intervention to fall in line with the marketised system and its consequences for course closures. The Johnson government, however, will also use any greater control over finances to massively accelerate the process.

It will also use these powers to enforce a regime of censorship of critical academics and legitimise the far-right on campus under the cover of its fraudulent “free speech” campaign. Last year the government threatened to cut funding to universities which did not accept the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, which slanders critics of Israel as antisemitic. The government’s “free speech” campaign on campuses is part of an attempt to claim that right-wingers and peddlers of racist and discredited pseudo-science are the victims of censorship.

While academics and other higher workers face the same far-reaching attacks, the UCU has kept all their struggles isolated and strictly limited. UCU members in Hull passed a motion against course closures in February, but the union has dragged out the negotiation process,

with a strike ballot only starting last month and ending on July 9.

Plans by the universities of Sunderland, Kingston and London South Bank to end their history courses—condemned by the Royal Historical Society and many staff and students—have been answered by the UCU with months of “consultation” and no plan to unify its members in a single fight. The union has responded to similar attacks at Aston University merely by beginning a petition. After the University of Portsmouth cut over half of the jobs in the English Literature department, the UCU boasted of having proposed “an alternative which retains the substantial cut to the staffing budget without job cuts.”

The UCU and the National Union of Students are hostile to the growing mass opposition of students to the marketisation and privatisation of higher education. Addressing student rent strikers earlier this year, who raised the issue of marketisation, UCU General Secretary Jo Grady described their political perspective as “a bit niche”. NUS President Larissa Kennedy bluntly claimed that “nobody cares.”

The pandemic has acted as a trigger event, accelerating the marketisation process which was already causing havoc within the university system, and setting off a wave of opposition among students. The battle in higher education is between two irreconcilably opposed perspectives: the capitalist, which insists the working class be given only the education required to produce a technically competent labour force, with knowledge of the arts, history and culture limited to the ruling class and affluent middle class; and the socialist, which insists on the right of everyone to the education and free time necessary to access the highest achievements of human civilisation.

Students who want to take forward the struggle for socialism should join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).



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