

Jobs massacre at UK universities

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The destruction of jobs, pay and working conditions in UK further education has accelerated in the wake of the 2023 sellout by the University and College Union (UCU) of a wave of strikes.

The marketisation of higher education in the UK can be seen more and more overtly in this social assault waged on the direct insistence of the major banks.

Queen Mary, University of London lists 44 institutions currently affected by redundancies. Stated job losses are around a thousand but many more are concealed behind non-specific announcements of “voluntary severance schemes.”

- On March 1, a strike ballot opened at Goldsmiths, University of London in response to a threatened scrapping of 130 jobs as part of management’s “transformation programme”.

In moves described as “a horrifying act of cultural and social vandalism” by one professor, up to a quarter of all academic roles are threatened at the world-renowned institution.

The former children’s poet laureate and professor of children’s literature, Michael Rosen, who has worked at Goldsmiths for 10 years, said of the work done by the university in the areas of education, libraries, literature and scholarship that he found it “unbearable to think that any of this is under threat from yet more mass redundancies.”

Angela McRobbie, cultural theorist and emeritus professor at Goldsmiths, said, “Goldsmiths is unique. It’s an institution that has trained young people who go on to do socially and culturally valuable jobs across the world. The possible redundancies on this scale is unprecedented and it is a terrible outcome in a national scenario that has pitched universities against each other.”

Staff redundancies will mainly hit the departments of theatre and performance, history, English and creative writing, visual cultures, politics and international

relations, music, anthropology, sociology, educational studies, psychology, social, and therapeutic and community studies.

Across the UK, as many as 100,000 university staff, 50 percent of the total, are employed on short term contracts, so the cuts will impact far more than the 130 employees identified at the university.

In an email announcing the job cuts, Goldsmiths said the redundancies were due to “a significant financial shortfall arising from lower than budgeted student recruitment for the academic year 2023-2024.”

Staff and students staged a protest in October 2021 calling on the institution to reveal the terms of a loan deal with banks Lloyds and Natwest. Redundancies are believed to have been demanded by the university’s “banking partners” as a condition for receiving a loan worth up to £7 million. Goldsmiths’ £60 million property assets were also thought to be included in the deal as collateral. Staff began a series of strikes in February 2022, when a “recovery plan”, in conjunction with Lloyds and NatWest, was announced involving the loss of 46 jobs.

- On March 8, a consultative vote on industrial action over job cuts was passed by staff at the University of Winchester who have been placed on notice of redundancy which would result in the university having to close its English language programme; institute for climate and social justice; centre for religion, reconciliation and peace; managed housing, and apprenticeships. The university claims it needs to make the cuts due to a £6 million structural deficit. There are 40 on the line in the current phase, with further job cuts expected.

- On March 13, 47 staff at the University of Portsmouth were placed at risk of redundancy as part of a major restructure dubbed “Academic Reset”. The university recently announced a £250m investment project to create links between campus and the city.

- On March 14, over 120 staff at Sheffield Hallam University were issued with “risk of redundancy” letters and given until March 18 to apply for voluntary redundancy or one of a “limited number of roles”. The institution recently carried out a voluntary severance scheme under which 140 academic staff have left or are planning to leave. Striking lecturers at the university were among those who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* from their picket lines last February, during a national strike.

- On March 14, the University of South Wales, which has around 23,000 students, confirmed it is looking to reduce staffing. A spokesperson told *WalesOnline*: “The university has opened a voluntary exit scheme for colleagues... This is one of a range of measures being taken to address a financially challenging environment.”

According to its latest published financial accounts, cited by *WalesOnline*, to the end of July 2023, the university generated around £151 million from tuition fees and educational contracts but had a net debt of £14.8 million.

- On March 21, Dr Emily Guerry posted to Twitter/X: “Today it was confirmed that Art History will be ‘phased out’ at the University of Kent – along with Anthropology, Journalism, Philosophy, Religious Studies and Music. What a tremendous loss.” The post has been viewed 700,000 times and received scores of supportive responses, such as, “They’ve gotten rid of every subject that adds beauty, depth, meaning, humanity & understanding to life.”; “I’m horrified to hear that”; and “They will continue to call themselves a university because they are conmen & charlatans.”

In November, based on data obtained in a series of Freedom of Information requests, the overseas student organisation Edvoy revealed that UK higher education institutions laid off up to 3,000 staff in the first wave of the pandemic, between March and September 2020. The University of Manchester (UoM) made 528 redundancies, the highest number of any university in the country.

The pandemic raised to new heights critical questions about the defence of education as a social right against its transformation into a market serving private financial interests.

The *Guardian*’s Gaby Hinsliff, noting that up to 40 percent of UK universities are expected to go into the

red this year, wrote that “some are asking how the sector would cope if an established university goes bust. Since that’s never happened before, nobody seems entirely sure how it would work: what would happen to students halfway through their degrees, or whether one failure might spook creditors into pulling the plug on others.”

Educators have conducted a series of regional and national strikes over the past decade. The government, the employers and the UCU have worked to limit these disputes to single issues to undermine the fight that must be waged, all while a lucrative market in higher education has been created. The wholesale assaults on jobs, pay, conditions and pensions are the symptoms of this marketisation and must be fought based on a socialist programme.

Expensive buildings, land acquisitions and other vanity projects are themselves tied up with the financialization of the universities and take resources away from staff salaries and the maintenance of entire educational departments.

The twin pressures of the need to compete for student funding—the recent government clampdown on immigration visas has meant a 33 percent fall in foreign student numbers compared with the same time last year—and the need to meet the demands of private investors are leading to the destruction of the jobs, pay, conditions and pensions of staff as well as educational standards and provision for students.

The UCU will not oppose the immense financial interests involved because its *raison d’être* is to act as a well-paid industrial police force for the employers and the government. Higher education workers must join with educators throughout the school system and establish rank-and-file committees, outside of the control of the unions, to unite workers and students based on the struggle for a new socialist political movement defending high-quality, publicly funded education as a universal right.



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