# British universities face funding crisis as job cuts and course closures threaten access



Universities across Britain are facing a severe crisis due to dwindling funding and significant budget deficits, raising concerns about the future accessibility of higher education, especially for working-class students. Institutions are responding to these financial challenges by announcing extensive job cuts and course closures, moves that threaten to restrict opportunities for many prospective students.

The University of Dundee in Scotland has emerged as a stark example of this precarious situation. According to a report from The Times, the university “may not exist in two years,” as it prepares to reduce its workforce by approximately 20 percent to address a £35 million deficit. Nationwide, nearly 100 universities have revealed plans to restructure and implement redundancies, highlighting the widespread nature of the crisis.

University managements largely attribute their financial difficulties to a sharp decline in international student enrolments. Amid visa restrictions imposed by the Conservative government in January 2024, including measures to deter migration by barring international students from bringing dependents, as well as increased visa fees and NHS surcharges, these numbers have plummeted by up to 40 percent. This reduction has had a significant impact on university income, as international students have historically paid substantial tuition fees, ranging from £9,000 to £30,000 per year, alongside other expenses such as visas and language tests.

However, many university workers and observers contend that the crisis is rooted in systemic issues rather than solely external pressures. Marc Peacock, a member of the University and College Union (UCU) at Goldsmiths University, told Socialist Worker, “Fundamentally the funding model is broken. It’s not mismanagement. This is what they wanted to do to universities—it’s ideologically motivated.” He highlighted that the shift towards marketisation — where universities are expected to operate like businesses with students as consumers — has been central to these problems.

This market-driven approach, encouraged under both Conservative and Labour governments, has involved shrinking block teaching grants and increasingly relying on tuition fees for revenue. International students became a critical income source, with universities investing heavily in recruitment agents and marketing. For example, York St John University generated £20 million from international tuition fees in 2022–2023, paying out over £6 million to recruitment agents. Despite financial hardships, salaries for senior university management teams remain high, often exceeding £300,000 annually, reflecting the competitive market for leadership talent.

The marketisation model has also led to cuts in courses deemed less profitable, particularly in the arts and humanities. Kingston University plans to shut down its humanities department, including a renowned centre for philosophy, a move that Nicola Field, a member of Kingston UCU, described as “an attack on the right of working class students to engage critically with society and institutions.” Similarly, the University of Chichester closed a successful masters course in the history of Africa and the African diaspora, leading to the redundancy of Professor Hakim Adi in 2023. Professor Adi criticised the business-first approach, stating, “Universities are being run like businesses. They see a course like ours and think, ‘Well African history is niche and unnecessary. Scrapping it can save us some money.’”

Government officials have expressed differing approaches to higher education. Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch has criticised lecturers perceived as promoting “woke” ideas, signalling a lack of interest in subjects such as anti-racist history or philosophy. Labour’s education secretary Bridget Phillipson has advocated for universities to be more efficient and align more closely with economic growth agendas, emphasising science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM), and business-related subjects as essential to becoming a technological superpower. Nevertheless, the ongoing funding crisis has cast doubt on the feasibility of these aims. Phillipson’s support for widening participation rings hollow amid budget constraints.

Students themselves face increasing financial burdens. Tuition fees in England were introduced in 1998 and have since risen to £9,250 per year, with a proposed increase to £9,535 in the coming year. Adjusted for inflation, these fees are worth less in real terms. Loan repayment terms have been extended to 40 years, and over 80 percent of students are expected to repay their loans in full, all amid rising living costs.

University staff have responded to job cuts and closures with resistance. At York St John, the UCU argued that despite sector-wide funding challenges, redundancies were not inevitable. They pointed to increased student numbers as offsetting inflation’s effects on tuition fee income. At Cardiff University, staff proposed alternative solutions to planned nursing department closures, including ending compulsory redundancies, freezing recruitment, and calling for government intervention to rethink funding models and reverse visa restrictions. They also highlighted the need for senior management to undergo training in effective university administration.

The UCU supports the abolition of tuition fees and advocates funding higher education through a levy of approximately 1 percent on businesses employing graduates. Workers across universities are set to strike, demanding the removal of job loss threats and calling for a reimagining of the higher education system as a publicly funded good rather than a market commodity.

Commenting on the role of international students, Katy Highet emphasised, “We cannot save universities by engaging in more aggressive recruitment and by treating international students as cash cows. Not only is the exploitation of international students morally reprehensible, it is also destined to fail.” She pointed out that the reliance on international students from countries like China is decreasing amid geopolitical shifts, and that this strategy does not address the systemic failure of the higher education sector.

The Socialist Worker reports that the crisis gripping British universities is a consequence of long-term policy decisions favouring market models over public funding, compounded by recent visa restrictions reducing international student numbers. As universities reel from these combined pressures, the future of accessible higher education in the UK remains uncertain, with significant implications for students, staff, and the broader society.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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