# British universities face crisis as job cuts and course closures spread amid funding shortfalls



Universities across Britain are facing a severe crisis, with many institutions announcing significant budget deficits that are leading to widespread job cuts and course closures. The situation is especially precarious for universities such as Dundee in Scotland, which faces the prospect of potentially not existing within the next two years due to a £35 million deficit, prompting plans to cut around 20 percent of its workforce.

Numerous universities—close to 100 according to the “UK HE shrinking” website—have announced plans for restructuring and redundancies. University administrations have largely attributed the financial shortfall to a steep decline in international student enrolments, a direct consequence of recent government-imposed visa restrictions and increased fees aimed at deterring migration. International student numbers have reportedly dropped by up to 40 percent following the Conservative government’s changes that include banning dependents from accompanying international students as well as hikes in visa and National Health Service surcharge costs.

These international students traditionally contribute significantly to university funding, as universities charge considerable tuition fees—ranging from £9,000 to £30,000 per year—alongside other associated costs such as visas, language testing, and living expenses. While this had previously been a lucrative source of revenue for many institutions, recent restrictions and geopolitical shifts, including reduced outbound student numbers from countries like China, have exposed the fragility of relying on this income stream.

Workers and union representatives have voiced their concerns about the causes and consequences of the crisis. Marc Peacock, a University and College Union (UCU) member 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 concerns over an increasing drive to cut arts and humanities courses, which he described as “socially enriching,” remarking, “It’s great that people study to be scientists. But not everyone wants to do that. Society would be quite dull if everyone was an engineer.”

Historical context indicates that universities in Britain transitioned from exclusive institutions serving mainly aristocratic and upper middle classes to broader access through policies introduced in 1992 by the Conservative-led government, which abolished the distinction between elite universities and polytechnics and emphasised “widening participation.” However, the current cuts threaten to reverse decades of progress towards inclusivity, with some university leaders advocating for a “radical rewiring” that would lead to fewer courses and a narrower academic offering.

For example, at Kingston University, management intends to close its humanities department, including its renowned centre for philosophy. Nicola Field, a UCU member at Kingston, criticised this move as “an attack on the right of working class students to engage critically with society and institutions and to contribute to society critically.” Similarly, Professor Hakim Adi was made redundant at the University of Chichester after the closure of his popular masters course on African and African diaspora history, a decision he attributed to an overly commercialised view of university education.

Both Conservative and Labour governments have increasingly expected universities to function like businesses, competing in a market where students are treated as consumers. Education secretary Bridget Phillipson, representing Labour, has urged universities to become more “efficient” and align themselves with government priorities such as economic growth and becoming an Artificial Intelligence (AI) and tech superpower, which emphasises courses in business, management, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths) subjects.

Meanwhile, the tuition fee landscape presents further challenges. Introduced in 1998 and raised incrementally since, fees now stand at £9,250 per year, with a proposed increase to £9,535 next year that does little to counteract inflation’s impact. Although students were originally told only higher earners would repay loans, loan repayment thresholds have been kept low, repayment terms extended to 40 years, and now more than 80 percent of students are expected to repay their loans in full. This comes amid rising living costs, deepening student indebtedness.

University management salaries have also become a matter of controversy. Despite facing financial crises, many senior university leaders continue to receive substantial remuneration packages often exceeding £300,000 annually, while administrative departments suffer from funding and staffing cuts. Marc Peacock raised questions about the sustainability of these business models, noting, “Why would an international student come over only to get part way through and their course gets cut?”

Industrial action is underway as university workers across the country strike to oppose redundancies. For instance, at York St John University, the UCU branch rejected the need for job losses despite financial difficulties, pointing out that increased student numbers had offset some deficits. Staff at Cardiff University successfully proposed alternative measures to avoid cutting their nursing department, including halting compulsory redundancies and utilising reserves.

The UCU advocates the abolition of tuition fees, proposing instead a funding model based on a levy on businesses employing graduates. They argue for education as a public good rather than a market commodity.

Critically, the crisis is deeply intertwined with political and economic policies developed in Westminster over many years. Both Conservative and Labour governments have contributed to shifting higher education away from public funding toward a market-driven approach. This has rendered universities vulnerable, especially when international student numbers fluctuate due to external geopolitical factors.

Katy Highet, writing in Socialist Worker, emphasised that relying on international students as sources of revenue is both morally questionable and strategically unviable. She wrote, “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.” Highet further stressed the importance of defending students’ rights independently of their economic contribution, advocating for higher education as a societal public asset.

As universities continue to struggle financially and operationally, with course cuts and staffing reductions accelerating, the future shape of higher education remains uncertain. The demands from university workers and unions for sustainable, publicly funded models of higher education reflect growing concern over access, equality, and the very survival of Britain’s universities.

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

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