
Decimation of H.E.

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Previous PSE articles on the crisis in Higher Education (HE) have discussed the effectiveness of recent industrial action - strikes and marking boycott - and the need for more democracy within UCU. This article starts by giving a detailed analysis of how 61 universities have been affected by redundancies, restructures, re-organisations and course closures, based on information sent by UCU members to the Queen Mary UCU live page (1). This shows how the HE sector is shrinking in unionised universities, followed by a discussion of what this means for the future of not just the HE sector but of FE too. It poses the question of whether campaigning for a Tertiary sector, which brings higher and further education together should be the focus of future union action. This could involve UCU working with other unions on a broader education agenda.

The attack on HE can be seen in several ways. The first observation is that the post-92 universities are not the only group of universities to be affected. Secondly, as a labour-intensive sector, the imposition of voluntary severance schemes, compulsory redundancies and Mutually Agreed Resignation Schemes (MARS) shows how the workforce is being systematically reduced. This can be seen in relation to the number of full-time posts that are affected, as well as the reduction of fixed term, hourly paid and other forms of precarious employment. Other measures introduced to reduce labour costs include a three-term teaching year, new work allocation models and the reduction of research time. 29 universities have voluntary severance schemes in place, with 22 having compulsory redundancy schemes. Bolton and Nottingham universities have Mutually Agreed Resignation Schemes in place which affect all staff. Employers do not need to have a specific redundancy situation to issue this notice. (see table 1.)

Universities are justifying redundancies because of the size of a deficit, a shortfall or to make savings. Except for Coventry University, which wants to make savings of £100 million, eleven universities are justifying redundancies with deficits of more than £50 million.

Universities have been making investments in property which appears as a priority over keeping posts. Oxford Brookes is the most indebted university, due to covenants to cover new buildings. Portsmouth University has made a recent £250 million investment

in estates but is also planning to make 50 academic posts redundant (see table 2).

The reduction of staff results in the closure of courses and the range of subjects taught. Performing and creative arts, languages and music have been closed in several universities. Recent announcements that redundancies will affect whole faculties, and in the case of Plymouth the whole university, suggest a wider range of subjects will be affected in future (see table 3).

The crisis in HE is now obvious, and all parties acknowledge that marketisation and pressure for universities to operate with a business model dependent on recruiting ever larger numbers of international students has failed. This is due to hostile immigration policies, which make it difficult for international students to travel with their families and to work after their studies are completed. High costs of health care also act as a deterrent.

The system of loans and fees is also accepted as dysfunctional. Viewing students as consumers has affected the relationship between students and academics, making it more transactional. Higher education needs a new financial settlement from government, but the recent Conservative government has been actively hostile to higher education and the Labour Party does not have a clear plan. There is a danger that some universities will go bankrupt, triggering an unplanned process of mergers and acquisitions. The resulting chaos and uncertainties will impact on local and national economies.

The future of universities has to be considered in a broader context of education policy and the relationship between higher and further education. Although the Labour Party manifesto mentions combining higher and further education, there is no detail provided about how this might be done. Martin Allen argues that new education policies will also have to 'address major changes in the economy and the labour market' as well as wider inequalities experienced by young people.

At this time of climate / environmental crisis, new industrial strategies will have to be developed which reflect local and regional needs. This provides another opportunity to rethink the system of education. HE and FE already work together in some regions.

In dealing with the crisis of HE for its members, UCU should start to argue that a new business model

Table 1: Universities with voluntary severance schemes and compulsory redundancies

Types of actions	Definition	Number of Univs
Voluntary Severance Schemes	A specific redundancy situation has to exist, and a consultation process will have started. Having identified staff affected, staff will be encouraged to volunteer for redundancy.	29
Compulsory Redundancies	The compulsory process begins if there are not sufficient volunteers for redundancy. The employer will then have to go through the redundancy consultation process to select and issue notice of redundancy to staff.	22
Total		51

Table 2: Sizes of deficits / shortfalls

Aiming to cut	Universities
£1-10m	York St John £4-5m, Surrey £10m
£11-20m	Aberdeen £12m, Northumbria £12.5m, Aberystwyth £15m, Bournemouth £15m, Goldsmiths £13m
£21-49m	South Bank £24m, Central Lancashire £25m, York £34m, Cardiff £35m
£50-100m	Coventry £100m
Total	12

Table 3: Subjects closed since 2022

Subject	Universities
Engineering & Science College	Aston
Music and Performing Arts / Theatre / Creative Arts / Industries	Bedford, Edge Hill, Middlesex, Leeds, Oxford Brookes
Language / Interpretation	Lincoln, Middlesex
Ancient Languages	Cardiff
Across Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences	Kent
Across University	Plymouth

could incorporate HE and FE into a new system of tertiary education. A recent HEPI report, *Four Futures: Shaping the Future of Higher Education in England*, outlined a scenario, based on a Lifelong Loan Entitlement for all learners, funded by government, with 'full modularisation of tertiary provision and agreed frameworks for credit transfer'. These frameworks were to be driven regionally. The growth of Metro mayors,

with their potential role in developing public services supported by HE and FE collaboration, could create new industrial structures which are based on green, zero carbon principles as well as creating care services to support a growing older population.

1. <https://qmucu.org/qmul-transformation/uk-he-shrinking/>