

# The state of H.E. in the UK: a personal view

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In this article I offer a personal take on the state of Higher Education, illustrated and supported with evidence from my experience of working in universities. I argue that my experience is emblematic of a sector-wide malaise under neoliberalism and that we need to reimagine university education.

I was recently made redundant from a post-92 university in the Northeast of England, when my subject, TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), was axed by fiat of the Dean of Faculty, who barely knew who we were or what we did. I had worked there since 2015. I had a good teaching and publications record. So did the rest of the TESOL team, who also lost their jobs. Almost overnight, decades of TESOL provision at the university ceased.

The consequences of this decision were devastating. Our MA and PhD students were left without qualified supervision just as they were about to embark upon dissertations and theses. They petitioned the Head of School, to no effect. The TESOL team, having reimaged the curriculum, developed a research culture, recruited PhD students, and incorporated authentic teaching practice into the MA, were left to compete against each other for temporary, and fractional, teach out work. Or ride the fast-track to redundancy.

Losing one's job, of course, is a serious matter, especially when you are in your 50s, as we all were, and retirement is not yet an option. The stress this entails should not be underestimated. It turns lives upside-down. One of us has been forced to relocate abroad, with all the personal and familial upheaval that this entails. Another is striking out alone in the gig economy of educational consultancy. A salutary reminder that behind each redundancy statistic is a human being.

The closure of TESOL was part of a wider cull of lecturers across the university and followed hard upon the savage cuts which have, in recent years, laid waste to traditional academic subject areas like English, History and Modern Foreign Languages.\*

The reason given for the redundancies was falling student numbers, especially among international students. This came as no surprise. It is a perpetual sword of Damocles. However, what was surprising was the speed with which the University had gone from a state of 'robust financial health' to such a parlous state that it needed to save millions of pounds. How had this come about so quickly? What was the role of management in this? What did it reveal about their competence or their accountability if lecturers were to pay the price?

The falling numbers argument didn't really stack up in TESOL, with recruitment holding up. We were targeted because we were Senior Lecturers or Associate Professors on permanent contracts and therefore, to quote management, an 'expensive' team. Our contractual stability and academic expertise were seen as a financial burden, and not an asset. This short-term approach is emblematic of a sector-wide preference for employing less experienced, cheaper lecturers on precarious contracts.

The case of TESOL reveals much about the top-down managerialism which bedevils universities. Lip-service is paid to 'consulting' staff, but decisions are taken in advance then staff 'consulted' post-hoc. Our TESOL counter proposal to redundancy was immediately rejected (did they even read it?) with no reason given. Similarly, university staff were 'consulted' on cost-saving measures, but none were taken up, especially ones suggesting temporary pay cuts for senior managers. (Cont. overpage)

This extends to Human Resources, who, under neoliberalism, often act as management enforcers rather than in the interests of employees, especially during industrial action. We approached them, through the University and College Union, on the question of age discrimination as we were all in our 50s. They promised an investigation but things immediately went quiet, and no result was communicated in time to have any bearing upon our departure from the university.

What, then can be done to address the crisis that we face in Higher Education? One thing is certain. The solution will not come from the top down.

In true neoliberal fashion, the new Labour government and the employer's body, UCEA\*, seem to want students, or customers, to pay more. But this is unsustainable. Do we really want to saddle students with even higher levels of debt? In any case, tuition fees have limited access for poorer students, failed to offset falling government investment, and burdened the taxpayer with unrepaid debt. The political climate around immigration is affecting the recruitment of international students.

The financial outlook seems grim. The Office for Students have said that 40 per cent of universities have budget deficits. What happens if a university goes bust, in my view a distinct possibility for some? The Labour government have intimated this is no business of theirs. But this 'hands-off' approach is not good enough. The university is still a publicly funded institution, despite the best efforts of all recent governments, and it is disingenuous to treat it as a private business, as those pursuing the neoliberal agenda know perfectly well.

In the same way, we cannot rely upon Vice-Chancellors, and other senior management, to represent the sector's interests, although petitioning the government around spouse visas for international students was a helpful move. They are part of the problem, not the solution, too invested in their eye-watering salaries, and for the most part, in my view at least, too remote from the practices of teaching, learning and research.

No. The best way to effect change, as ever, is through collective action from below and, for lecturers, this is perhaps best achieved through UCU. There have been recent victories here, most notably on the value of Universities Superannuation Scheme pensions and on security of tenure within the Open University, which has finally been dragged, albeit kicking and screaming, into offering

its Associate Lecturers permanent Full-Time Equivalent contracts.

However, we have emerged from a period of industrial action, including a divisive Marking and Assessment Boycott, with no substantial pay increase and, consequently, management are riding high in the saddle. Thus, for example, the OU is threatening to fire and rehire Associate Lecturers on contracts over FTE 1.3, reneging on agreements reached on the introduction of permanent contracts in 2018. UCU have achieved minor concessions, such as increased compensation, but the threat remains.

Other battles loom on the horizon. The battle for increased government investment, fair pay for lecturers, an end to precarious contracts, parity of regard for traditional Arts and Humanities subjects, automatic progression from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer, ratified by national agreement, and now under threat.

To conclude, the neoliberal model has failed. We need to reimagine university education as a public good, embodying and promoting democratic values and serving the community. It is good to see UCU publishing and supporting recent work calling for this\*. This vision has always been present, as seeds beneath the snow, even in the darkest of times. To adapt the beautiful words of Arundhati Roy, 'Another education is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing'.

\* This pattern is being replicated nationwide, as the UCU website at Queen Mary's University documents.

\* Indeed, UCEA have used the fact that tuition fees have not increased since 2012 to help justify the current pitiful pay rise for university lecturers.

\* *Changing Lives and Transforming Communities: Harnessing the Power of Post-Compulsory Education*. John Holford, Eddie Playfair, Howard Stevenson.

