

Britain: Leaked document reveals escalating attack on higher and further education

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In the last weeks, hundreds of job losses and department closures have been announced at universities and colleges in Britain as the direct result of government funding cuts. The losses come as a secret government plan was leaked to the *Observer*, revealing that up to 133,000 Further Education (FE) student training places will be lost in 2010-2011. The imposition of pay freezes and further job losses are also being considered at FE colleges nationally.

The cuts are planned as official unemployment among young people rapidly approaches 1 million. The document, dated October 12 and marked, "Protected—Funding Policy," proposes to impose £350 million cuts in spending for the provision of FE training places for 2010-2011. Some £100 million cuts will be made in administration with a further £252 million cut from programmes such as Train to Gain, Adult Apprentices and Skills for Life.

These are among a number of "preferred options" listed in the document, which include cutting by 10 percent money for apprenticeships for over-25s and freezing salaries and shedding staff at FE colleges. The cuts are part of £5 billion in immediate spending reductions across all public spending outlined by Chancellor Alistair Darling in his April budget.

These drastic reductions would be on top of the £180 million cuts that the government is demanding be made next year by universities in "efficiency savings." Research compiled by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) has found that in the last year 1,318 academics have been made redundant with 5,097 more jobs immediately under threat.

Last week, the University of Bristol and Manchester Metropolitan University announced up to 377 possible job losses. At Bristol, 250 jobs are to go by 2011-2012, representing 5 percent of its workforce. The university is to make annual savings of £15 million. At Manchester Metropolitan University, management announced a reduction of "potentially 127 posts." The university employs 4,200 staff and intends to cut the jobs among its support departments.

At the University of Leeds, up to 10 percent of academic posts (187 jobs) are expected to be lost as part of a plan to

cut costs by about £35 million from 2010. The job losses would leave the university with the highest ratio of students to staff (17.6:1) of any institution in the Russell Group of the UK's top 20 academic institutions. Members of the UCU at Leeds have passed a motion of no confidence in the universities' vice chancellor and balloted for industrial action.

At Doncaster College, more than 600 jobs are at risk, more than half the workforce. Sheffield Hallam University is to cut 20 academic and related posts, and a further 320 associate lecturers face job losses.

The London College of Communications is to close 16 of the 19 courses it provides at a single school, resulting in 37 redundancies. On November 9, a group of LCC students began a two-day sit-in to protest the cuts.

This week, Bournemouth University Business School announced that 15 jobs are to be shed, as part of the second restructuring in two years. More than 150 staff have lost their jobs since 2006. The University of Sussex said it needed to make "significant savings in targeted areas," with 115 jobs at risk. On Thursday, staff and students at Sussex held a lunchtime protest in response.

Job losses already carried out include 320 at the University of Sheffield, 130 at the University of Stirling, and 100 at Gloucestershire University with another 30 planned. At the University of the Arts London, 37 have been made redundant with 16 courses ended; 150 jobs have gone at the University of Salford.

University College London (UCL) is planning to make cuts of 6 percent. A UCL spokesman summed up the new zeitgeist in which universities now operate, saying, "You hear about sacred cows in terms of funding, and often health and schools are mentioned but not especially universities. What UCL and other institutions are doing is anticipating tougher times ahead."

At London Metropolitan University (LMU), up to 550 jobs are to go as the result of the university having to pay back £36.5 million over its entitlement under the government's funding formula. A further £15 million has also been

withheld from its recurrent teaching funding.

The LMU devised its own definition of funding rules on student drop-outs and therefore reported a far lower drop-out rate than the national average. It was thus able to continue claiming funding for students who had already dropped out of their courses. This week, the governors at LMU were asked to resign, prior to the imminent publication of an inquiry report into the funding crisis. Brian Roper, the former vice-chancellor of LMU, has reportedly been asked to take “the major responsibility and culpability” for the situation.

The crisis at LMU cannot be explained away by assigning individual blame. The fundamental cause is the destructive education policies of the Labour government, aimed at creating furious competition between educational institutions in the UK and their rivals internationally for students, research funding and business sponsorship. It is only within such a “winner takes all” climate that the crisis at the LMU could develop.

Under Labour, universities have been transformed into bodies run directly in the interests of big business. Formerly under the control of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, this week overall control of universities and colleges came under the remit of Lord Mandelson’s Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS).

Mandelson has begun moves to make a university education more and more unaffordable for working class students. Last month, he initiated a review into the level of tuition fees to report in autumn 2010. The review is expected to recommend that fees be allowed to increase to between £5,000 and £7,000 a year from the current level of £3,225.

Earlier this month, the DBIS published *Higher Ambitions—the Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy*, outlining the government’s 10-year plan for universities. It calls for policies to bind higher education even closer to the needs of business.

It states, “Our expectation that businesses should play an active role in the higher education system will continue to rise...they need to be active partners with universities, not passive customers. As the key definers of the skills needs of our economy and the key beneficiaries of the skilled workers produced by higher education, businesses have a crucial role in the funding and design of programmes, in the sponsorship of students, and in offering work placements and practical experience for students.”

It warns, “There can be no room in the system for vocational programmes that do not constantly evolve to meet changing business needs.”

The report calls for the UK Commission for Employment and Skills to “advise on areas where there is an insufficient

supply of graduates in particular disciplines, and also cases where university programmes are failing to reflect changed business requirements or the priorities articulated by employer-led bodies.”

The massive retrenchment now under way in higher and further education is the direct result of the hundreds of billions of pounds of public money handed over to bail out the banks. Comments this week by Sir Alan Langlands, chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, underscored that the era of a general expansion of higher education spending over the last decade is at an end. Speaking of the last decade, during which education spending rose from £4.7 billion in 2001 to a projected £8 billion next year, Langlands said, “It may be seen in history as a golden age of wonderful increases in real terms increases in higher education.”

The latest announcements only highlight the refusal to fight any of these cuts by the UCU or any of the HE and FE trade unions. Even as thousands of their members lose their jobs and livelihoods, with tens of thousands of students affected, the UCU has not organised a single struggle or campaign based on uniting all education workers and students throughout higher and further education.

The response of the UCU to the leaked government plans came in the form of a letter from UCU leader Sally Hunt to Kevin Brennan, minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs. Calling for an “urgent rethink” of the government’s plan, Hunt merely complained as if shocked that the union did not “receive any warning from you at our meeting on 22 October that these sort of cuts are possible.”

Any campaign the UCU has endorsed, on a strictly localised and limited basis, has been based solely on demanding that voluntary, rather than compulsory redundancies are implemented. This has not prevented countless universities and colleges from imposing whatever redundancies are required, compulsory or otherwise.



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