

Sheffield universities to cut hundreds of jobs amid higher education deficit crisis

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Workers at the University of Sheffield are facing potentially hundreds of job losses in the coming years, as the institutions seeks to save £23 million in costs.

This month, the University leadership has launched a targeted voluntary severance scheme, to be followed by compulsory redundancies next spring. The deadline for staff to apply for redundancy is January 8.

Falling student numbers, which dropped by 2,200 enrollees (7 percent) this year, have plunged the institution into a dire financial situation and created a £50 million deficit. Like all UK universities, it is dependent upon sky-high tuition fees.

The University, which employs over 8,600 lecturers and professional workers, is implementing spending cuts and reviewing infrastructure projects as it looks to tackle the shortfall.

These will have a drastic impact on the over 30,000 people studying at the institution: domestic students as well as the international students who make the highest tuition payments, upon which the University of Sheffield is financially dependent. Its 10,000 international students, many from China, were largely attracted by its top 100 position in the QS World University rankings. But the University now stands at number 105 after sliding down the scale this year.

University upper management are targeting professional services (non-academic) staff and those schools and subject areas that recruit higher numbers of Chinese students. Departments being hit are the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, the School of East Asian Studies, the Journalism School, and the School of Mathematical and Physical Sciences; the Materials academic staff within the School of Chemical, Materials and Biological Engineering; Accommodation and Commercial Services; the English Language Teaching Centre; IT Services; and the faculty and school-based professional services staff.

Staff expressed their frustration with the way the university has been run and management's unrealistic vision of never-ending growth by passing a vote of no confidence at a trade union all-staff meeting on November 14, approved

by 93.3 percent of the 944 workers who participated. Workers from the Unite, UNISON and University and College Union (UCU) were involved.

Workplace relations have been strained for a number of years due to a series of pro-market measures and cuts. University management are imposing a major restructuring of most academic departments and Professional Services teams. This merges teams together and makes it easier to cut staff. The move follows the closure in 2021 of a world-class Archaeology department and a proposed over 100 jobs losses that could see the closure of the University's Nuclear Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre.

Proposals for job losses take place amid a clampdown by management on the freedom of expression of staff and students who oppose the crimes of the British ruling elite.

Over the summer, the University used legal action and disciplinary measures to evict a student encampment opposing the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. The university is complicit in these war crimes due to the relationships between its Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) and aerospace companies such as BAE and Boeing that provide parts for American war planes used by the Israeli state. The university hired private investigators to spy on students opposed to these links. In October, security staff violently removed anti-genocide protesters at the careers fair that hosted these arms manufacturers.

During the same period, Vice-Chancellor Koen Lamberts (who is paid over £300,000 per year) oversaw a pay raise for himself and the lifting of the 10 percent cap on pay increases for university executives.

A similar crisis scenario exists at the city's other major higher education institution, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), which has seen a long-running dispute over mass job losses and cuts to teaching budgets, pay, and conditions. SHU lecturers protested last month over the delay of their pay rise until next July.

Management recently cut 225 academic jobs, of which 80 were fired through compulsory redundancy. The university announced in June a further voluntary severance scheme to

shed 400 non-lecturer roles. Sheffield Hallam faces a catastrophic financial situation due to falling student applications and its costly, ill-fated London campus project and other construction plans.

Both universities can proceed with this scorched earth policy due to the role of the University and College Union (UCU) which has sat on opposition to these attacks, most recently by demobilising a strike planned this September at the last minute.

The situation in Sheffield has developed amid a huge financial crisis facing the entire higher education (HE) sector. As part of desperate attempts to fend off bankruptcy, 76 higher education institutions are imposing restructuring and redundancy plans, according to an official report by the Office for Students, a UK government regulator.

They forecast a £3.4 billion black hole for 2025-26, with teaching-focussed institutions worst affected. Many higher education institutions face massive job losses and mergers to survive. The immediate cause of this is the anti-immigration policies and austerity measures imposed by the Labour government of Sir Keir Starmer and previous Conservative-led administrations. Other factors include higher taxes due to the recent increase in national insurance contributions for businesses and rising costs due to inflation.

Most of the sector faces a catastrophic money shortage, impacted by falling international student numbers, with student visa applications down by 16 percent compared to last year, according to the Home Office. Nationally, domestic student recruitment has increased by just 1.3 percent, far below the forecasted rate of 5.8 percent.

The entire sector has become totally dependent upon sky-high tuition fees from international students as funding from the Treasury has been reduced. This situation has its roots in decades of marketisation and creeping privatisation, as the ruling class dismantles the higher education system as it has existed for decades.

They have cut central government spending and increased the dependency on tuition fees since their introduction by Tony Blair's Labour government in 1998. This month, in the first rise since 2017, Labour hiked fees by 3.1 percent from the 2025-26 academic year to £9,535 per year. Further rises are planned that will increase the debt burden on students entering the job market.

For lecturers and other university staff, pay has fallen precipitously due to years of below-inflation pay rises, while workloads have skyrocketed and precarious contracts have proliferated.

The vote of no confidence in management at Sheffield demonstrates the determination of staff to fight, but this cannot find any expression within trade unions led by a bureaucracy which has driven every major fight into the

ground.

In the struggle immediately ahead, university workers at Sheffield and nationwide cannot oppose management's attacks through the UCU, which has overseen a series of defeats stretching back to the onset of mass austerity in 2010. These laid the basis for the sellouts by the union of the national strikes that took place in 2018 and 2022-2023, over pay, pensions, equality and casualisation.

The UCU divided up strikes, isolating them from workers engaged in industrial disputes in other sectors during the 2022-23 strike wave, and treating them as separate disputes with individual employers. They blamed the personal mismanagement and greed of specific executives, rather than basing the struggle on a fight to unite workers against the marketisation of education and its root in the demand by the capitalist class for increased exploitation in order to drive up competition between institutions in the education "market".

The union bureaucracy is tied to both management and a Labour government boasting itself as the "most pro-business in history". The UCU is making only the meekest appeals to the right-wing Starmer government to change its ways and fund universities properly. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady stated, "The tuition fee increase... will not stop the rot; Labour now urgently needs to set out how it will put the sector on a sustainable footing by providing long-term public funding."

A new perspective is required, uniting workers and students in a common fight. Higher education is a basic right of the working class, won over decades of struggle with social benefits far beyond those valued by big business.

The defence of education is a political issue, bound up with the opposition to the demands of the financial oligarchy to slash spending on public services in order to channel billions of pounds into propping up the super-rich oligarchy, waging trade wars and boosting military spending. It requires a joined-up struggle across all sectors of education and across national borders.



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