

The Vandals at the Gate: Defending the profession in an age of austerity—the view from the UCU (UK)

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The UK coalition government is committed to a radical austerity agenda based on large cuts in public spending. It claims that this is necessary to reduce the deficit in the public finances, but in reality, the austerity agenda is being used as an opportunity to marketise and privatise public services, including higher education.

I am going to sketch out the three main challenges facing UK higher education, particularly as it affects the situation in England. I'm also going to highlight the ways in which the UCU and others have sought to defend the academic profession through organising, mobilising and political action.

Challenge 1: The UK government's obsession with reducing public expenditure mean that there is less direct public funding for higher education and research

Even before the financial crisis in 2008 the UK's level of public spending on higher education as a share of GDP was significantly below that of France, Germany, the USA and the average for OECD member states. For example, public spending on higher education by the UK dropped from 0.9% of GDP in 2006 to 0.6% in 2008¹.

Since we last met in Vancouver in 2010 the funding outlook has become even bleaker, with unprecedented changes in England. By 2014-15 the HE budget in England will be cut by 40% and this overall reduction is based on a headline cut of 80% to the teaching budget. While some public subsidy for higher cost subjects such as science, engineering and medicine will remain, all direct teaching funding for the arts, humanities and social sciences has been abolished.

To cover their teaching costs, English universities will have to rely almost exclusively on income from publicly-subsidised student loans. In order to make up the funding shortfall, universities in 2012-13 will be charging an average tuition fee of £8500—a massive increase from the previous figure of £3375. From this academic year England will have the highest public university tuition fees in the world.

Under the guise of stricter immigration controls the UK government has also made it harder for international students to obtain visas to study in our country². And at one high-profile institution (London Metropolitan University) the UK immigration authority recently revoked the university's licence to sponsor international students and up to 2700 students are threatened with possible removal from the country.

The consequences of the new tuition fee policy for student access and participation are already negative. There has been a 10% drop in the number of people from England applying to study in the UK³. Some universities have suffered very large reductions in applications—e.g. 25% (University of Derby), and 20% (University of Surrey). Given that we have one million young people out of work, this represents a chronic waste of talent.

On the research side, the cuts in public funding are less dramatic. Due to an effective lobbying campaign, particularly from scientists, the research budget has been frozen in cash terms. But this still represents a 14% real terms cut by 2015 – at a time when many other countries are investing in research as a response to the economic downturn⁴. In addition, the remaining research funding will be even more concentrated in a small number of 'elite' universities, and there will be much greater emphasis on the economic impact of that research. In this climate, basic research and disciplines in the arts and humanities feel particularly vulnerable.

Overall, the government's university funding reforms will see annual public spending on teaching and research in England fall to its lowest proportion in over a century. Our forecasts are that by 2014/15 annual government funding for teaching and research will make up just 15% of universities' income - the lowest since the 1900s⁵.

Challenge 2: The UK government's assault on employment rights in general and its related attack on public sector workers' terms and conditions in particular mean downward pressure on academic pay, pensions and job security

² According to government statistics the number of student visas issued have dropped by 30% in the twelve months to June 2012, compared with the same period in 2011.

³ UCAS, 'Data reported for applications considered on time for 15 January deadline', http://www.ucas.com/about_us/media_enquiries/media_releases/2012/20120130

⁴ Campaign for Science and Engineering, 'Public Funding of UK Science and Engineering: Putting Government Rhetoric to the Test', 13/09/11 <http://sciencecampaign.org.uk/?p=7144>

⁵ UCU, 'Government funding for university teaching and research to fall to lowest proportion in over a century', 5 January 2012 <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=5858>

As in many other countries one of the main attacks on terms and conditions of employment has been over pensions.

In the UK we have two schemes in higher education (Teachers' Pension Scheme and the Universities Superannuation Scheme) and in both of them UCU members are being asked to pay more, work longer, and receive reduced benefits when they retire.

These proposals have prompted co-ordinated strikes across the public sector and an ongoing 'work-to-rule' in the traditional universities. Through forms of industrial action we have been able to win some concessions, but nowhere near as much as we'd hoped to achieve. During the campaign the UK government attempted to drive a wedge between public sector and private sector workers on the issue of pension provision. I suspect that other governments around the world are also attempting to 'divide and rule' over pensions and so I'd welcome your thoughts on how we can best challenge such strategies.

UCU has faced similar problems in relation to salaries, where higher education staff have taken a real terms pay cut of more than 10% over the last three years. Universities have also driven down the proportion they spend on staff to a historic low of 53%⁶. Frustration over pay restraint is growing and we may be heading for strike action later this year.

Finally, despite having some of the weakest employment rights in Europe, the UK government are proposing to make it easier for employers to sack staff, and harder for workers to take claims for unfair treatment to an employment tribunal. Maternity rights are also at risk, and sickness absence benefits and health and safety protection are both under attack.

Through our national union federation—the British TUC—we are fighting back with a campaign to protect employment rights and to Stop Employment Wrongs (<http://stopemploymentwrongs.org>); but the government appears wedded to a labour market strategy based on a 'race to the bottom'.

Challenge 3: The ethos and values that underpin higher education and research are under attack from privatisation and managerialism

In many ways, this is the biggest challenge we are facing at the moment. Why? Because it comes from many different sources (increased tuition fees, the expansion of private providers, attacks on academic freedom and collegial governance from within our own public universities).

In the UK, restrictive labour laws mean that it is illegal for unions to take strike action against the government's education policy. However, this hasn't stopped UCU from challenging marketisation and managerialism in higher education. I'd like to highlight four main ways in which we are doing this.

First, demonstrations remain a key part of the campaign against marketisation. At the end of 2010 UCU supported massive student mobilisations against fee hikes, and although ultimately unsuccessful, these campaigns have re-energised the student movement.

The next big student demonstration is planned for 21 November and once again staff will be out on the streets with their students. In UCU, we realise we are part of a global campaign against fees and marketisation and that's why we continue to be inspired by student campaigns in places such as Québec and Chile. UCU is also playing an active role in the wider trade union mobilisations against the cuts and the next big national demonstration takes place in London on 20 October.

Secondly, UCU has been fighting a high-profile political and media campaign against the expansion of private, for-profit providers such as the Apollo Group and Kaplan. In particular, we have highlighted how these companies are poor value for money and are likely to damage the UK's global reputation for quality. We are continuing to build alliances with other interested parties against for-profit providers, including in parliament, and some of the excellent work done internationally (for example, by Senator Tom Harkin in the US Congress) has been helpful in our parliamentary campaign.

And the good news is that we've had some success against for profit providers. Our campaign has forced the government to abandon plans for new legislation which would have allowed multinational education businesses (such as Pearson) to award their own degrees.

Thirdly, we need to convince the general public of the need for more public investment in higher education. Consequently, UCU is about to launch a new outward-facing campaign aimed at:

- raising public awareness of the contribution to society and economy made by universities and colleges;
- winning public support for increased state funding;
- initially persuading the UK government to commit to funding tertiary education at the OECD average of 1.3% of GDP.

A key part of that campaign will be to commission research on the value of higher education, not just its contribution to economic growth and employment, but also on the wider public benefits (for example, on health and vulnerability, civic engagement and public attitudes).

Fourthly and finally, trade unions must continue to promote alternatives to neo-liberalism and austerity. UCU has developed its own alternative vision of education and in Scotland (if not in England) this has had some impact on the politicians. For example, the Nationalist Government in Edinburgh have abolished tuition fees for Scottish-based students and proposed major reforms to increase the democracy and transparency of university governance and management.

The development of progressive alternatives must also take place at the European and global levels. In this context we welcome the recent initiatives within EI to do precisely that (for example, establishing the new education in crisis website <http://www.educationincrisis.net>). And we hope that this EI higher education conference in Buenos Aires will contribute to that wider campaign around 'building alternatives'.

Thank you for listening.

