

LAST WEEK



“Provided the chancellor with a free pass”

Said Andrew Goodwin, of consultancy Oxford Economics, about the £27bn the Office for Budget Responsibility found down the back of the sofa – allowing George Osborne to backtrack on tax credit cuts in his spending review. Goodwin added that the OBR has a history of optimism.

Keep on truckin’

Chester officials decided to keep with their 600-year tradition of holding a festive Christmas parade after it came under threat from Coca-Cola, which wanted to impose its big red truck on the town. And a lorry driver in Manchester made what could only have been an artistic protest against the corporate giant by overturning his vehicle on the East Lancs Road, spreading some of the 22 tonnes of ketchup he was carrying over the carriageway.

“Not got a for sale sign on it anymore”

The managing director of Lonsdale Estates said the Eighth Earl of Lonsdale is no longer looking to sell the Blencathra mountain in Cumbria as they have dealt with their £9m inheritance tax bill in other ways.

£15,000

The pay rise the average earner in Yorkshire and Humber would need to qualify for an 80 per cent mortgage, according to an inquiry by the National Housing Federation. The average home in the region cost £166,000 and is highest in Harrogate – £277,000.



Open university students at a graduation ceremony. Its Leeds centre is one set to close. Photo: OU

WHY DON'T WE JUST... KEEP OPEN UNIVERSITY REGIONAL CENTRES OPEN?

Lydia Richards

The Open University has a proud reputation for providing distance learning to thousands of people across the UK in a flexible and innovative way. However, its recent decision to close down seven of its regional centres will mean that, for many, learning will become a lot more distant indeed.

The proposals would see the closure of centres in Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Gateshead, Leeds, London and Oxford, putting 502 jobs on the line. Only two regional centres would remain, in Manchester and Nottingham, alongside the national offices in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Milton Keynes.

Staff in the local offices offer crucial support for students. They provide course materials, help students with disabilities, arrange tutorial groups, run examination arrangements, advise on study options and manage local degree ceremonies. If the regional centres close, their significant expertise will be lost.

Over 6,400 staff, students and members of the public have signed a petition against the plans. The university's own

academic body, the senate, rejected the proposals to close the regional centres, saying that they were “high risk” and “failed to support the academic mission of the university”. Politicians, too, have raised concerns, with several local MPs calling for the centres to be retained.

The university says it wants to centralise support services for students. But staff fear that closing seven centres at once will lead to chaos, and are clear that sometimes people need face-to-face support in their local area rather than from a call centre many miles away. If the Gateshead centre shuts, the next nearest centre would be a 250-mile round trip away in Edinburgh.

Members of the University and College Union also argue that there's a big missed opportunity here. Instead of closing these regional centres, the Open University could choose to turn them into vibrant community hubs for student activity as well as for its academic staff, most of whom work remotely.

As students are forced to pay more than ever before for their higher education, it's imperative that students are well supported. Sadly, these plans will mean that seven cities will be left without the expertise and knowledge currently based there, and support for many students will be significantly farther away. ■

Lydia Richards is the University and College Union's regional official covering the Open University