



Empty gestures: UK academics say universities could do more to protect posts during the pandemic.

UK ACADEMICS SEE THE OVER UNIVERSITIES' COST-CUTTING MOVES

A survey of faculty and staff members uncovers anger and fear over job cuts and other measures following the pandemic. **By Natasha Gilbert**

Faculty members, postdoctoral researchers and PhD students at UK universities are enraged by moves to cut jobs, and are accusing institutions of adopting 'autocratic' decision-making practices under cover of the COVID-19 pandemic, finds a survey of academics around the nation.

The survey, which had 1,099 respondents, was conducted between June and August 2020

by higher-education researcher Richard Watermeyer, at the University of Bristol, and his colleagues. Half the respondents held the rank of lecturer or above, 14% were PhD students and another 14% were postdocs. Two-thirds of respondents were from 'research-intensive' universities; two-thirds identified as female and 61% were on permanent or open-ended contracts. The survey results were published

last month (R. Watermeyer *et al. Br. J. Sociol. Educ.* <https://doi.org/gk7hrb>; 2021).

Respondents describe widespread concern over what they say is a small number of university administrators making decisions on employment and the future direction of institutions, often without consulting faculty or staff members. They also complain of major increases in teaching workloads without extra

compensation or recognition. Many of these changes especially affect junior researchers, including postdocs, the survey finds. “There seems to be a real sense among the academic community in the UK that universities are using the pandemic as an opportunity to push through certain cost-cutting agendas,” says Watermeyer, adding that junior researchers felt exploited.

In open-ended responses to the survey, one PhD student wrote, “money will be prioritised before people be they staff or students”, adding that universities “will work the academics who survive the jobs cuts into the ground to achieve financial gain”.

But UK universities say that the pandemic has forced them to tighten their belts. Raj Jethwa, chief executive of the Universities and Colleges Employers Association, based in London, says its 172 member institutions are acting honourably as they struggle to deal with great financial pressure. “While the pandemic has put severe strain on the finances of institutions, their fundamental mission has not changed,” he says. “Higher-education institutions have worked hard to minimize the impact of the pandemic upon jobs, workload and health and well-being.”

‘Gold Command’

Seventy per cent of respondents say that pandemic-related cuts have created job insecurity and a culture of fear among staff, with university leaders becoming more autocratic as a result. Some respondents say that they fear shifts towards “undemocratic governance” will undermine academic independence. “My university’s executives leapt on the opportunity to call themselves ‘Gold Command’ and state that consultation on anything would no longer be possible,” an associate professor wrote.

David Harvie, a researcher in finance and political economy at the University of Leicester, is among faculty and staff members there who have been made redundant since the start of the pandemic; his last day in post was 11 August. Of these, around two-thirds held teaching and research positions, says Harvie, who manages communications for the Leicester branch of University and College Union (UCU). The union represents 120,000 employees at universities and other institutions across the United Kingdom.

Harvie says that he was forced to take redundancy and that, in his opinion, the university’s efforts to consult with faculty and staff members over its workforce-restructuring plans were a “sham”. In June, the UCU highlighted 200 job losses at the university over a 15-month period, with a further 26 posts still at risk. Harvie also alleges that the university tried to silence critical voices, including scholars who have spoken out against it.

Nishan Canagarajah, the university’s president and vice-chancellor, told *Nature* that the



Richard Watermeyer.

changes taking place there are “not a knee-jerk reaction” to the pandemic. Rather, he says, the moves are part of the university’s long-term plans. “Our strategic plan will focus investment in areas aligned to our research strengths including support for staff from early-career PhDs right through to professors,” he says.

Academics’ concerns about UK university leadership were simmering even before the pandemic. One survey carried out in 2017 and published in January 2020 (M. Erickson *et al. Stud. High. Educ.* <https://doi.org/ggk7j6;2020>)

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found that almost nine out of ten academic faculty and staff members gave a thumbs-down to their institution’s senior-management team. The 5,888 respondents cited a lack of accountability, poor leadership and an over-reliance on performance metrics, among other issues.

Duty of care

Watermeyer’s survey exposes widespread feelings of distrust and distress at what respondents call universities’ lack of care for academics’ health and well-being. “The crisis has highlighted how much staff well-being is readily sacrificed and ignored,” wrote an assistant professor in a response. Another respondent described their role as a “dumping ground for student problems”, adding: “I am tired, fed up and fearful. I have been having suicidal thoughts. This is all I know – I feel helpless.”

Patricia Murray, a cell biologist at the University of Liverpool, says that faculty and staff members there were blindsided in January, when the university announced 47 proposed compulsory redundancies in health and life sciences. She says that university management doesn’t appreciate the effect of job cuts on people’s health. “Every week we are sent a meaningless well-being letter, but there has been no mention of the serious adverse impact on the health of those targeted for redundancy.”

The university’s actions have caused a huge amount of stress for early-career researchers, with management abandoning their duty of care to staff, says Murray. The compulsory redundancies have caused PhD students and postdocs at Liverpool to rethink their hopes for a UK academic career, she adds.

A University of Liverpool spokesperson says that the downsizing plan had been in the works for a year and a half. “The university does not make proposals of redundancies lightly and the project to restructure the faculty of health and life sciences has been carefully considered over 18 months,” the spokesperson says. “This project was being worked on pre-COVID-19.”

Watermeyer thinks that the job-insecurity practices that UK academics are now struggling with can be traced to a shift among universities, starting in the late 1990s, to behave more like businesses concerned with their bottom line than as institutions serving the public good.

Global problems

The developments at UK universities are not unique. The pandemic has also tightened budgets at US universities, and postdocs and other early-career researchers are among those hit hardest, says Thomas Kimbis, head of the US National Postdoctoral Association, based in Rockville, Maryland. “Postdocs remain a vulnerable class of workers,” he says.

Peter Hurley, a higher-education policy researcher at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia, says that the country’s universities are struggling to keep afloat after losing tuition fees and other revenue from international students. He says that there is a lot of uncertainty in Australia’s academic job market, with an estimated 17,000 positions already lost. “I don’t think it is a good time for early-career researchers and those looking to become postdocs in Australia,” he says.

Watermeyer says that to stay afloat, universities worldwide must change their business model to become less reliant on student tuition revenue. Governments will need to invest more in universities, he adds. Otherwise, he says, “the situation found in the pandemic may only worsen”.

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