



## **Members' Newsletter - April 2025**

### **Stop, Pause, Do Differently, With Less....?**

Trade union activists have been warning for many years that the system of funding higher education is unsustainable and subject to major problems if one or more of the multiple funding streams dries up.

Had the £9,000 tuition fee, astronomical when first introduced, been pegged to some level of inflation, we'd be in a very different situation.

The reality is that a dip in student numbers from other countries across the sector, combined with a failure of the government to allow necessary inflationary increases to the UK fee level for undergraduates, means that universities are struggling and the University of Brighton is not immune from this.

Unfortunately for us, a university in one of the most expensive parts of the UK to live which does not feature in the top 50 of any league tables very often is going to have problems. Add to that the fact that we're a second university in a not particularly large city, and it's no surprise that under the current circumstances, things are difficult.



What UNISON is doing nationally, is campaigning to put pressure on the government to fund higher education properly. We're organising a **lobby of MPs on Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June** and we'd like as many members as possible to book the day off and come with us to ask your MP what they're doing to solve this problem. Local MPs should be, and will be concerned about the future prospects of their university, especially given the size of the employer and its effect on the local economy. We'll produce more details about the lobby soon, but please save the date!

Of course we'd hope that Vice-Chancellors are doing something similar, and Donna will say that she's lobbying frantically behind the scenes, but has to prepare for the worst case scenario. We'd like to see a bit more public campaigning, maybe a letter or two to the press or a delegation to government ministers...?

The problem we have though, is that senior managers at any university will react if they foresee trouble ahead. Cuts and potential redundancies now are not about current financial problems, but those that can reasonably be assumed to occur if things pan out a certain way. If we can't grow student numbers and retention to give the university income at a level that it needs to be, then we're going to have deficits.

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Universities can cope with deficits, but not when we owe millions to the banks (borrowed in the good times to build new academic buildings and Varley Halls of Residence, I believe) which we are paying back steadily on the basis that they won't change the terms of those loan repayments as long as we meet certain conditions. The problem is that these conditions require a certain level of cash generation i.e. the banks need proof that this university can make money!

So, the whole pause, do differently, North star etc, is a combination of the financial mess that needs to be solved and having a new Vice-Chancellor with some ideas, or at least buzzwords to explain the ideas, whether they're new or not.

The current plan, based on asking us all what we think we can do differently is nothing new. The University has been built on members of staff making suggestions and using our initiative to make things more efficient, so in that sense, we're doing all this already.



Obviously we all want the University to survive and get through this difficult stage, but fundamentally, this is not going to be solved unless further income is found. We can shrink, devalue the student experience and become more of a degree certificate issuing body, with little expectation of effort from students, but there comes

a point where doing differently with less means that we can't continue in any meaningful way.

One aspect of the current situation is that the staff are split in two groups. The majority of us are seen as a very expensive drain on resources which has to be controlled, hence a freeze on recruitment with all the associated problems that brings. The other, smaller group is seen as an absolute necessity to manage us out of the mess. Donna is currently in the market for a Chief Marketing and Growth Officer and a Director of Governance and Legal Services via recruitment consultants Alumni Global.

Freezing the posts of those who do the work in this place whilst recruiting more senior managers is a classic managerial reaction to things going wrong, with no real evidence that this will work. Staff are already stressed and overworked and being told that we all have to cover for absent posts whilst we're spending money to attract "the best candidates" in new, made-up jobs, will do nothing for morale.

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Many people are also concerned about the prospect of outsourcing, which Donna has not ruled out here, after having been heavily involved in it before. Of course the government would love for universities to “find efficiencies” and positively encourages it as part of the deal for tuition fees to go up to £9,535. The problem is that it makes the service worse and quite often does not mean efficiency – only confusion and more work as the real workforce has to fix all the problems caused. The partial outsourcing of student recruitment is a good example of a fiasco engineered by senior managers who have moved on and don’t have to deal with the fallout.



There’s a suggestion that the new strategy will involve increasing international student recruitment, which has been a perpetual strategy since the early 90s, so that’s nothing new. The problem is that this is yet another recipe for more “investment” in senior roles which will do nothing to recruit international students who actually exist, turn up and complete their

course.

The pattern of recruitment of ill-prepared international students to UK universities is well documented and it’s necessary to be really careful to make sure that those we recruit are capable of completing the course. Chasing wild targets based on made up numbers will not solve the financial problem, but only give a short term false sense of security which will rapidly diminish when the students don’t turn up, or drop out as soon as we want them to pay their fees.

Fundamentally, successive governments have created a system that does not work when tuition fees become too high to politically justify and the government is unwilling to properly fund education, because the apparent need for more weapons is deemed to be more pressing. The mess we’re in is political, and it requires a political solution – campaigning for proper funding for universities and all public services.

What UNISON or any trade union can’t do is make suggestions on what to cut when our members’ jobs depend on the work, unless of course it’s senior manager roles, where a decision has already been made to have more of them, no doubt at vast cost as “an investment”.

Doing differently with less is likely to lead to course closures and a general reduction in activities which contribute to the student experience. There’s likely to be more reliance on remote teaching, which is difficult where is conflicts with international student attendance.

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What makes us think that UK students looking for remote tuition are more likely to choose to study “at” Brighton?

Some students may welcome having less to do and maybe no exams to worry about, but there’s a major danger that the UK higher education system is dumbed down to such an extent that the degree is not seen as worthwhile.

Meanwhile, our members’ jobs are under threat and our pay and working conditions are also deteriorating because of the lack of funding for decent wages and the need for fewer of us to do the work of more.

This is not sustainable, and not something we can sit back and accept. So, of course we’re happy to support genuine efforts to make the University more efficient, but as part of this process we have to demand:

- No outsourcing of jobs and services
- No wasting money on consultants and more senior appointments
- Recruitment to vacant posts, or no increase in workload where vacancies are not filled

UNISON will continue to campaign to defend education and those who work in it. Fixing the financial crisis across the sector is a priority and it’s both tragic and entirely predictable, depending on your view, that this is happening under a Labour government. Either way, demanding adequate resources to universities is going to dominate over the next few years.

If you want to get involved in our campaign, please let us know.

**10 May – UCU demonstration and rally for education, central London**

**3 June – UNISON lobby of MPs to demand funding for universities**



### 8 May - Black Members’ meeting

For further details - [please join our dedicated Team](#)



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