

Striking Against the Neoliberal University

Article by Calum McGeown, Louise Taylor

June 7, 2022

Successive waves of strikes on behalf of students and academics demonstrate that higher education in the United Kingdom is at breaking point. The inordinate cost of attending university, coupled with the structural dynamics that leave teaching staff exploited, precarious, and burnt out, combine to produce a system that is fundamentally unsustainable. It's time for those in charge to go back to the drawing board to consider how universities can help solve economic, social, and environmental challenges, rather than add to them.

Our upcoming edition “Making our Minds: Uncovering the Politics of Education” further explores this and other challenges facing higher education in Europe. Order or subscribe now to receive your copy in print.

UK higher education is in crisis. Since 2018, the University and College Union (UCU), the main trade union representing academics, has been engaged in an industrial dispute over pensions, pay, workloads, gender equality, and casualisation. Unresponsive senior managers are facing an exodus of workers, with the union reporting almost two thirds of university staff as saying they are likely to leave the sector. In February 2022, vice-chancellors^[1] gutted academics' pensions, with cuts averaging over 33 per cent. It is no surprise that growing numbers no longer see the profession as compatible with sustainable career progression, healthy working conditions, and good workplace wellbeing.

This systemic exploitation of workers is symptomatic of the intense commodification of education in the UK (and beyond). This pernicious process threatens the capacity of universities and their staff to nurture the critical thinking required to generate appropriate and rapid responses to the planetary emergency. While universities were historically the birthplaces of ground-shaking movements for social justice, today their continued subsumption into the machinery of neoliberal capitalism seriously undermines this potential.

The transformation sets a dangerous precedent. British universities are becoming less a space to discover and develop alternative ideas and more places producing knowledge that supports rather than challenges the status quo. But the commodification of education was not inevitable: it was a political choice.

Industrial action

As of May 2022, the current academic year has seen three rounds of strikes across many UK universities. These actions represent a significant loss of income for striking staff and have resulted in growing tensions with non-striking colleagues. As their demands are ignored, staff members involved in industrial action are being forced to consider increasingly

disruptive tactics. Many branches have already voted to implement marking and assessment boycotts, which could result in students not progressing or graduating. Meanwhile, a flood of resignations from external examiner roles is raising pressure on senior management in a show of intervarsity solidarity. When not on strike, academics simply working to the terms of their employment contracts and no more has illustrated the extent to which universities have for too long relied on a “goodwill” exchange of uncompensated labour.

The exploitation of university workers is consistent with some of the most extractive neoliberal business models. In England, the average salary of a university vice-chancellor is disproportionately large at 296,000 pounds [348,000 euros], while unrealistic workloads mean that some casualised lecturers in the same institutions are paid below the minimum wage. Two thirds of these top jobs are filled by men and, at the current rate of change, it will take another two decades to achieve gender equality. Many female academics believe that even their unions are not doing enough to resolve this long-standing injustice. These structural inequalities only exacerbate the issues of pay, workload and precarity for Black and minority ethnic academics, for whom the chances of securing senior positions are significantly lower than for their white colleagues.

This pervasive austerity is not about saving money; rather, it is rooted in a neoliberal politics that puts economic productivity above all else. Restructuring the UK’s university sector in recent years has allowed it to generate an immense 46.8 billion pounds [55 billion euros] in reserves. Yet chronically overworked and underpaid staff are increasingly disillusioned with conditions that undermine their ability to educate students in meaningful ways. This conveyor-belt approach to higher education is not conducive to forging the deeply innovative and reflexive work needed across all disciplines to respond to the imminent and long-term threats posed by the planetary emergency.

The neoliberal university

These breaking-point issues for university staff are indicative of the wider “small state” push faced by public institutions that puts profit and wealth over the needs-based provision of quality services. Higher education has not been spared. Universities are increasingly run like businesses, marking the evolution of what some have called “academic capitalism”.

The introduction of student fees in the UK in 1998 accelerated this process, instantly making universities less accessible. Ability to pay, not academic ability, became for many the determining factor in whether they could attend university. More recently, the government’s 2010 decision to cut funds to universities and raise the cap on tuition fees to fill the budget gap was a seismic event in the commodification of education. In the ensuing pursuit of high levels of productivity and turnover, students have become “customers”, educators “service providers”, and teaching and learning “student experiences”.

England, Northern Ireland, and Wales independently rank as amongst the most expensive countries in Europe in which to “consume” an education. For example, caps on fees currently stand at 9250 pounds [10,900 euros] per year for any UK citizen studying full-time in England, meaning that a three-year undergraduate degree can cost 27,750 pounds [32,650 euros]. Fees for international students are considerably higher.

This inordinate cost really matters. It either stops prospective students from low-earning households from accessing further education at all or else saddles them with excessive levels of debt. The pressures are similar for academics: low pay and extensive casualisation make universities particularly toxic workplaces for those without access to other sources of financial support. For early-career academics, precariousness is compounded by the need to continuously relocate in the pursuit of work and the obligation to constantly secure research funding to cover salary costs.

The pandemic exacerbated these tensions. Students continued to pay excessive fees for an education that was compromised by continued disruptions and the massive shift to online learning. The responsibility to navigate this rapid transition disproportionately fell to already overstretched workers. This change had an immediate impact on students, staff, and their families that was felt across the education system, but it also opened universities up to greater risk in the longer term. The changes to how lectures, seminars, and tutorials were delivered risk opening a window of opportunity for senior managers that must be kept firmly shut. Prioritising online delivery and the use of pre-recorded material could edge the university sector even closer to a gig economy model of work. Doing so would also allow university managers to further cut campus overheads by shifting them onto the households of students and staff as personal costs.

Coupled with a systemic housing crisis, the unfolding energy crisis, and rising costs of living, the role that universities currently play in reproducing and exacerbating social injustice cannot be ignored. Not only has the neoliberal drive within higher education negatively impacted the life chances of working-class students and staff; their exclusion must also be recognised as detrimental to the research those institutions produce and the learning they provide. These are important considerations when reflecting on Green concerns for social justice generally. However, they have significant implications regarding the role of universities in responding to the planetary crisis specifically. Given the centrality of social justice to research-intensive, multi-disciplinary projects on climate justice, just transition, and a Green New Deal, for example, the lack of both representation and the insights brought by diversity damages the analytical substance and integrity of this critical work.

The neoliberal obsession with productivity coupled with fiscal austerity has reshaped universities for the worse in other major ways. The arts, humanities, and social sciences have, for example, long been neglected by university managers in favour of the lucrative links to private industry that STEM subjects provide. At their worst, these include partnerships that accept funding from the fossil fuel industry for research related to climate breakdown and channel graduates into unsustainable careers in the extractive industries. Rather than advancing critical understandings of the world around them, universities have, to varying degrees, become complicit in sustaining the ecocidal status quo.

The willingness of vice-chancellors to embrace this business model risks turning universities into mere “degree factories”. This might have already been the case were it not for the dedication of undervalued staff to academic integrity, intellectual innovation, the challenging and questioning of the status quo, and the nurturing of new talent. But that danger is always present. With goodwill in increasingly short supply, we can no longer rely

on an exploited workforce to uphold these principles whatever the circumstances. Rather, we need a new vision of fair and sustainable institutions reorientated around the emancipatory and exploratory value of education.

Universities are increasingly run like businesses.

Imagining a healthy university

Achieving sustainability in higher education means rejecting the neoliberal perspective that equates it to an overwhelming degree with economic competitiveness, growth, and fiscal might. A healthy university cannot be ranked using economic indicators alone. The UCU's ongoing industrial dispute provides clear evidence that when wealthy institutions exhibit such disregard for their workers, they undermine their very ability to function. Without educators, researchers, support staff, and students, after all, universities are little more than empty, expensive buildings. Sustainability therefore means putting people first. That means treating workers and students fairly, providing quality and well-rounded education that encourages intellectual curiosity, and prioritising critical and creative engagement with the world's most pressing problems, rather than simply preparing students for careers in a fundamentally unsustainable and unjust economy.

A first step would be abolishing student fees to make university education accessible to all who wish to pursue it. Their relatively recent introduction, as well as the comparatively low fees that students are charged elsewhere in Europe, shows that the commodification of education was always a political choice, and one which must be fought everywhere. Nor should removing fees be used to justify making further cuts to staff pay or university resources. Public funds must again be properly allocated, meaning the state must begin treating higher education as the essential common good that it is – and funding it as such.

A healthy and contented workforce is central to realising that good. Including but also going beyond issues of fair working conditions, decent pay, and equality in the workplace, a focus on wellbeing and care would mean rebuilding the university as a diverse and inclusive community. This could be helped by providing, for example, easy access to affordable, if not free, childcare. Perhaps most importantly, universities should be democratised to give both staff and students a greater say in how they are run.

The planetary crisis requires not only new approaches to education but also prioritising inclusive, holistic, and interdisciplinary ways of thinking about the challenges we face. This would mean, for example, placing much greater emphasis on understanding how to co-exist with our environment and nonhuman neighbours in more harmonious, non-exploitative, and non-dominating ways. The arts and humanities should be properly valued when engaging with such complex questions, especially on the deep cultural transformations needed to transition to a green society. Achieving this holistic approach also means establishing better connections and co-productive relationships, not just between university departments but also with the wider community these institutions are embedded in and supposedly serve. Universities have an important prefigurative role to play in implementing new structures and practices to help bring a more just and sustainable world into being.

A healthy university cannot be ranked using economic indicators alone.

Rather than buttressing an ecocidal economic system, universities should therefore be leading the radical transformations needed to address the planetary crisis. This should become their main mission in the coming decades. In short, we need system change, and the ongoing disputes in UK universities remind us that we need it urgently. Given the role that workers will necessarily play in implementing any of these transformative changes, resolving those disputes is of utmost importance. Recognising academics' deeply personal concerns about pensions, pay, and working conditions as symptoms of a much greater problem should alert us to this. Striking university staff will need a wide platform of support if they are to win the fight for our universities and their place in a just and sustainable future.

[1] The principal academic and administrative officers of British universities.



Calum McGeown is a climate activist and PhD student of political theory at Queen's University Belfast. His research interests include green political theory, post-growth political economy, state theory, climate breakdown, and the post-carbon transition.



Louise Taylor is a PhD student at Queens University Belfast. Her research interests are ecofeminism, ecotherapy, social justice, and mental health.

Published June 7, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/striking-against-the-neoliberal-university/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.