

# The crisis in higher education

The last five years have seen an unprecedented wave of industrial action in UK higher education. There have been a number of periods of strike action by university staff between 2018 and 2023, culminating in a Marking and Assessment Boycott in spring and summer 2023. Significant solidarity from students during these disputes has intersected with students' own grievances, particularly over their treatment by university administrations during the pandemic. These strikes reflect a profound and ongoing crisis in the HE sector, and they have also positioned universities as a key site of struggle over neoliberalisation. At the start of the disputes Bill Schwarz noted in a *Soundings* editorial that the picket lines were 'convivial locations of joy and determination, and the occasion for unprecedented conversations with colleagues'; places where 'Everything - everything - about the political and intellectual configuration of the universities was opened up. Teach-outs ran on, alongside the pickets and demonstrations'.<sup>1</sup>

In the intervening period, amidst all the hardships of reproducing longstanding industrial action, and in face of the intensifying assaults that have disproportionately targeted staff working in the critical Humanities and Social Sciences, such questioning has continued: the specific demands in the dispute have continued to prompt broader challenges and critique. This special issue brings together articles which discuss both direct experiences of these processes of retrenchment and the broader, and longer-term, dynamics of the restructuring of higher education: it maps key trends and dynamics, while also giving a sense of some of the devastating personal impacts these processes are having. Several contributors also delineate ways in which such processes are being challenged and resisted.

These struggles are also of wider significance: universities are major sites of employment, of the reproduction of privilege, and of struggles over ideas about 'meritocracy'. And, as articles in the issue discuss, they also remain possible sites of

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alternatives, and are places of knowledge production, despite current threats to their independence and critical role. For all their tensions - which, as the articles in this issue make clear, are many - they carry out important functions of education and research, which are valued by many.

## Framing the crisis

Universities and university labour have long been conceptualised in rather exceptionalised ways, and seen as rather rarefied spaces. The power relations that shape them have tended to be taken as given, rather than subject to detailed critique or challenge. But academia remains strongly informed by assumptions and lines of power along gender, race and class.

Amy Morton notes the difficulties of adapting to the unspoken mores of the academy for those who arrive there by non-traditional routes. Struggles such as the Rhodes Must Fall movement, as well as broader challenges to universities' relations with colonial practices and legacies, are some of the most significant ways in which such narrow understandings of the university have been recently challenged through political movements and organising.

As Gurminder Bhambra argues in an introduction to a collection of essays on *Decolonising the University*, such movements have sought 'to question the epistemological authority assigned uniquely to the Western university as the privileged site of knowledge production and to contribute to the broader project of decolonising through a discussion of strategies and interventions emanating from within the imperial metropolises'.<sup>2</sup> These crucial arguments about the elitist character of higher education, including its entrenched relations with colonial structures of power and their legacies, have not, however, featured in some of the most influential public intellectual writings charting the current reconfiguring of universities.

This absence of discussion on power structures is a problem in Stefan Collini's work, though he has deftly charted some of the major shifts in the sector, including engaging with the impact of managerial cultures and the consequences of the hikes in tuition fees in 2011.<sup>3</sup> Collini's work raises important questions about the function of universities, makes a limited defence of their role and of intellectual work in the context of issues such as fees, and has shaped broader discussion and debate.

These writings, however, frame the reconfiguring of universities in rather de-

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politicised terms, and in turn have depoliticising consequences. In particular, Collini is particularly loath to position the ‘crisis in HE’ in relation to broader dynamics of neoliberalism and marketisation. This has implications for the kinds of political positions that emerge from his work. As Michael Rustin argues in his contribution to this issue, specifically referring to the interventions of Collini, as well as of Keith Thomas, ‘powerful as their critiques of the marketising reform programme have been’, they have ‘for the most part been a defence of the traditional, knowledge-generating purposes of university education, not of democratic inclusiveness’.

This narrower form of critique has significant implications for the terms on which the crisis of higher education is framed. In particular, it cuts off lines of equivalence and solidarity with other sectors that are also sites of struggles over precarious labour, and also at the front lines of the consequences of marketisation. By contrast, this special issue locates the crisis of universities within the broader contours of the transformations being wrought by post-2008 neoliberalism. It seeks to delineate the pulverising impacts of neoliberalism on the sector, and to glean what the situation for universities tells us about contemporary neoliberalism, and emergent possibilities for resistances and solidarity.

It is crucial to situate universities as institutions that were at the heart of the emergence of the neoliberal project, and have been integral to the production and experimentation with neoliberal ideas and logics. As Robin D.G. Kelley has argued:

[the] [c]risis engendered by neoliberalization is made more visible as the university continues to be a consequential site of struggles over policy, access, and the production of knowledge. However, this is not to say that the university is merely a victim of an invasive neoliberal order, corrupting once pure sites of knowledge production and liberal education.<sup>4</sup>

This argument clearly locates universities as sites of contestation; they have been important for generating neoliberal logics and practices but also as sites of alternatives and struggles over knowledge production. Taking these dynamics seriously is essential for making sense of the current crisis and the ongoing struggles in the sector.

The logics underpinning the neoliberalisation of universities have been challenged by the organising work of a number of different unions, and by student activists. In this respect, while the strikes of the Universities and College Union

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(UCU) have been about specific demands, the central issue that many of us have been contesting is the broader process of marketisation. As Howard Stevenson argues here, not every UCU member on strike, or boycotting their marking, viewed their action ‘as an assault on the ideological basis of the neoliberal university’, but ‘such sustained industrial action, waged over such a long period of time, has developed into a serious challenge to the system, as much as it is a dispute about wages and working conditions’.

Such challenges imply more thoroughgoing critiques and demands for alternatives than the restatements of elitist academic perspectives given by figures such as Collini and Thomas. As Jonathan Davies and Adam Standing note in their intervention, the solution to the ‘decline of the academic profession as an “autonomous” self-governing entity, and its subordination to rampaging neoliberal managerialism’ cannot lie in a return to an abstracted, idealised professionalism. Rather, bringing marketisation into question opens up a broader horizon of challenges - including, as I will discuss in the next section, critiques of the structuring of academic labour - that are largely left off limits by Collini and other similar writers. It also implies and generates the possibilities of different alliances and solidarities between staff and students, including workers who have tended to be marginalised by union organising in the sector.

## Mapping the crisis

There have been long-standing processes of neoliberalisation in higher education since (at least) the 2000s. This special issue foregrounds what we see as some of the main political antagonisms in relation to which universities are being positioned.

Successive Conservative and Conservative-led governments have positioned universities as key sites in ‘Culture Wars’, and have attempted to shape a political bloc in opposition to so-called ‘wokeness’ (a trend which, as Mark Schmitt’s essay indicates, is also deployed in opposition to progressive struggles in German universities). This has gone hand in hand with a disproportionate targeting of critical social sciences and humanities by university managers for cuts and redundancies. Such strategies have been buttressed by a government which, as Andrew McGettigan argues, has sought to associate such disciplines with what it has depicted as ‘low value’ degrees. Further, related processes mean that the more critical disciplines are becoming progressively institutionally marginalised, or erased.<sup>5</sup> This is symptomatic

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of wider ideological struggles over how universities are to be shaped and articulated.

There has been a concerted ideological assault on critical research programmes and faculties, even when they are performing well against favoured 'performance indicators'. For example, retrenchment in the Business School at the University of Leicester in 2021 was specifically framed by university leaders as being driven by a strategy to 'disinvest in scholarship and research in critical management studies and political economy'.<sup>6</sup> Despite sector-wide platitudes in relation to equalities, there have been strongly racialised and gendered dimensions to such attacks. Thus Professor Hakim Adi at the University of Chichester has recently been made redundant, despite being a highly respected academic and an extremely influential figure in international debates on Pan-Africanism, Communism and the Black Left, as well as being the first British person of African heritage to become a professor of history in the UK.<sup>7</sup>

A number of local disputes are currently being fought against redundancies that - at least in part - reflect these kinds of ideologically targeted cuts and redundancies. Thus an all-out strike at the University of Brighton is contesting redundancies which have targeted the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, a key hub of critical research - for example, into questions of solidarity and internationalism. A local dispute has also been contesting threatened redundancies at the University of East Anglia.

A critical consideration of the various forms of restructuring of academic working conditions is a necessary part of any challenge to the impacts on the sector of marketisation and the neoliberal ideological assault. As Felicity Callard has emphasised, questions of labour are frequently marginalised or down-played in discussions of higher education.<sup>8</sup> A central issue here, and foregrounded in many pieces across the issue, is the increasing prominence of conditions of precarity in contemporary universities. These are not straightforwardly new issues in the sector, given that it has long been characterised by very unequal and hierarchised forms of labour. There has, however, been a very significant intensification of precarious labour and short-term contracts in the period since the hikes in fees of 2011. This has coincided with significant influxes of capital into at least some of parts of the HE sector, which have intersected with huge capital-intensive investments into the higher education estate - including major, and at times aggressive, campus developments.<sup>9</sup> The money spent on these investments clarifies that reliance on precarious labour is

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not inevitable, but is the specific outcome of particular political choices.

Fatema Khatun and colleagues, all of whom come from backgrounds they define as 'non-traditional', discuss here, in vivid terms, their experiences as precaritised staff:

While initially being excited by the prospect of a 'proper' lecturing job, all of us find ourselves sitting on the periphery, a place which is profoundly outside of the normalised experience, based on our identities as non-traditional students who have 'made it'. With such a loaded label attached to us, we are positioned as having a greater level of responsibility for creating pastoral relationships with students, and to serve as 'positive' role models. This stands in direct contrast with the terms of our contracts, which are offered on a short-term basis.

Their account emphasises how precarity articulates with inequalities of gender, race and class, as well as other forms of structural inequality.

As Olivia Mason and Nick Megoran have argued, precarious workers are much more likely to be vulnerable to abuses of power such as bullying and sexual harassment, which are a big problem in the sector.<sup>10</sup> Precarity is, of course, not limited to academic labour; and during the last decade there have been important industrial disputes led by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain involving majority-migrant workers employed as outsourced cleaners in universities in London. There are potential solidarities and alliances across workers to be developed and articulated here - and these disputes can also unsettle some of the limits of the academic horizons shaping UCU's organising.

The dynamics of university retrenchment also intersect with, and exacerbate, existing inequalities. Thus, while discourses of 'Levelling Up' often imply stark contrasts between a wealthy South and poorer North in England, Beverley Hayward's account of the closure of campuses of the University for the Creative Arts at various locations in Kent signals some of the inequalities masked by such broad-brush and simplistic political imaginaries. Hayward traces some of the ways in which these closures - and the marketised logics that drove them - have further intensified inequalities in different parts of the South East of England. As she observes, 'by annexing these spaces in deprived places in Kent, privilege is reproduced in others, that is the leafy suburbs of Surrey. Accordingly, in this space of higher education, meritocracy is an illusion'.

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Hayward's account, as well as David Davies's discussion of Derby University's Buxton campus, offer insights into some of the many attempts that have been made to generate progressive institutions - which have the ability to unsettle some of the exclusionary logics that shape universities/university spaces. As Davies notes, the Buxton campus offered new forms 'of widening participation and access to higher education', and drew on 'the rich histories of adult and continuing education embodied in the University Extra-Mural tradition'. His account points to the importance of providing such higher educational opportunities in areas particularly impacted by de-industrialisation.

Ian M. Cook and colleagues' account of the experience of OLIVE at Central European University (CEU) - first in Hungary and then in Austria, after that institution's forced move due to the Orban regime - adds to these insights. OLIVE was a pioneering initiative, with roots in the CEU Roma Graduate Preparation Programme, which sought 'to pose the question of how a university could respond to the maelstrom of the crisis narrative in relation to displaced people in Hungary, and how it could do so by re-invigorating ideas about access and the university's public purpose'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly in current times, the trajectories of many of the alternatives discussed in this issue have been fraught and contested. Thus, while initially celebrated by CEU, OLIVE was closed in 2023. As Cook and colleagues note, 'as it became clearer that OLIVE was not a short-term response to a "crisis", and, rather, sought to open up the university in a more sustained way for displaced people, enthusiasm amongst the leadership waned'. This is further evidence that creating more open, plural and inclusionary university spaces that challenge some of the neoliberal logics delineated here is not a straightforward task. The difficulties such initiatives face - experienced by the Centre for Urban Research on Austerity (CURA) at De Montfort University (discussed in this issue by Jonathan Davies and Adam Standing) as well as by OLIVE and the Buxton campus - are further explored in the final section of this editorial.

## **Intervening in the crisis**

Central to any discussion of attempts to forge alternatives in the context of contemporary universities is a set of concerns around struggles over who makes decisions and on what terms and what and whom universities are for. This

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in turn relates to a fundamental set of questions about the broader impact of neoliberalisation on the political and organisational cultures of higher education. Neoliberalism and marketisation profess their commitment to ‘choice’, but - as the articles in this issue clearly demonstrate - the process of marketisation in HE has itself involved, as well as running alongside, a whole set of restrictions on decision-making, and in a whole range of ways. As Davies and Standing note, the neoliberal university is sustained by a range of ‘authoritarian management practices’, which it is very difficult to challenge, or even discuss, and which can often be very personalised.

Such pressures on the democratic cultures of universities have been compounded by the intensification of the role of business, and business practice, in different aspects of university life: in university management; in a more narrowly economic understanding of the value of degrees; and in the constant pressure for academics to win external funding as part of their job, to name a few. As E.P. Thompson’s castigation of the University of Warwick as a ‘business university’ in the early 1970s emphasises, these linkages are not necessarily new, but their intensity is.

As John Narayan and Lucia Pradella note in their discussion of King’s College London, this raises questions about democracy within university decision-making, which in their case has led to a challenging of the role of multinationals in their governing body (as well as the role within it of government actors and the military establishment). The battle for democracy needs to be understood as a core struggle in the progressive remaking of universities, and proposals for change should aim to reconfigure expectations in this area - going beyond limited and tokenistic union representation on bodies such as University Courts - which lack any real power or ability to challenge decisions. It is also linked with Stuart Cartland’s argument about the shaping of broad democratic rights for students, and with student-led demands and campaigns for divestment from the arms trade and fossil fuels.

Secondly, any assessment of the prospects for a more progressive higher education sector must take stock of how it relates to the broader political conjuncture. As Howard Stevenson suggests, although the Conservatives may well feel that they are drifting towards defeat, ‘it is not clear how much anticipation it might be sensible to encourage’ in relation to a potential Starmer-led Labour government. Indeed, the current approach of Starmer to higher education seems to be largely focused around a perception of it as a terrain through which a narrow



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economistic policy agenda can be implemented. As Stevenson points out, Labour's 'Five Missions' briefing document discusses universities 'largely in terms of their contribution to the skills agenda, and their role in local economies'; while 'research is framed almost entirely in terms of its effect on economic competitiveness, in the context of a hyper-globalised economy'.

This highlights the extent of the shift that has taken place within Labour: there is no longer any question of seeing university workers and students as part of a potential constituency of radical change, as in the Corbyn era - as seen in the 2017 election, for example, in the queues of students waiting to vote at university polling booths. And this narrow and economistic view also emphasises the extent to which Starmer's Labour is refusing to engage with, or shape, a more hopeful future for students and young people - who should be seen as a core constituency for Labour; while it also further evidences Starmer's shunning of potentially generative links with critical left research (something which figures like John McDonnell facilitated, for example around discussions of public ownership). The devolved administrations are offering limited alternatives to this approach, but - apart from small, if significant, differences in terms of regimes around fees - the broad trends would appear to be largely similar.

Finally, given the unlikely prospect of any substantive progressive alternatives to the crisis in higher education coming from the Labour Party, there is a need to think about other possible means for developing challenges to the marketisation of the sector. As Stevenson and others suggest, it is crucial here to recognise the importance of the ongoing UCU disputes as a starting point - though, as he also suggests, it is important to take stock of both the strengths and weaknesses of these struggles.

The disputes have been important in the challenge they have made on some aspects of the crisis in higher education, and in opening up potential alliances and solidarities. They have offered an actually-existing alternative to thinking about university labour as a rarefied profession abstracted from broader struggles, particularly when strikes in 2022-3 were intersecting with a broader strike wave. But these disputes also raise questions we need to engage with and reflect on.

Firstly, while there have been some attempts to link the disputes to broader critiques of marketisation, and to construct broader alliances with students, university workers represented by other unions such as Unite, Unison and IWGB,

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and with workers beyond universities, these have tended to be underdeveloped, and have often happened on an ad-hoc basis, rather than resulting from a more consistent attempt to develop solidarities and common struggles. These alliances need to be more consciously developed if a clearer challenge to marketisation is to be articulated.

Secondly, while universities need democratisation, there are also questions about the effectiveness of union structures in enabling and facilitating the involvement of diverse workers in higher education. In her reflections on trade union organising in *Soundings* 82, Farheen Ahmed pointed to some of the serious weaknesses in trade union structures when it comes to facilitating the participation of ordinary workers, particularly those who are not already acquainted with trade union organising.<sup>11</sup> The UCU disputes have clearly mobilised many people across the sector, but many members have felt dis-engaged by, or actively un-engaged with, union structures, hierarchies and factions.

Finally, as Andrew McGettigan's account emphasises, the crisis in higher education is not static - and the dynamics of the sector are shifting in particular ways, for example in relation to the recruitment and participation of international students. There is a need to engage proactively with these shifts - through tracking how the sector is evolving, but also through identifying new forms of leverage for union activity. At present the crisis appears to be entrenched, but the sustained resistance and opposition of the past five years point to the existence of pressures from below that have the potential to shape different futures for universities, and those who work and learn in them.

*Dave Featherstone*

## Editor's note

This issue of *Soundings* is a double one, and it also includes articles not related to the main theme.

*Leila Prasad* has written an account of a discussion between Sita Balani, Amardeep Singh Dhillon, Gail Lewis and Adam Elliott-Cooper on Sita Balani's book, *Deadly and Slick: Sexual Modernity and the Making of Race*. The book charts the state's racial taxonomies alongside its mobilisation of categories of sexuality and gender, in both the historical colonial context and the contemporary imperial centre. Through

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showing us the field of battle and its character, Sita gives us a tool with which to help build aligned constituencies of opposition and vision.

*Aled Singleton* discusses population movements in Wales between the late-1950s and the mid-1970s, a time when millions of people in Britain moved from towns and older industrial settlements to the urban periphery. He explores the long-term impact of these moves on later generations, drawing on four recent interview accounts gathered from people who lived in South Wales after World War Two, and on Raymond Williams's concept of structure of feeling.

*Steve Iliffe and Jill Manthorpe* argue the need for a better understanding of the forms that contemporary anti-vaxx movements can take and what is fuelling them. They describe recent anti-vaxxer actions in a number of countries, as well as the history of anti-vaxx movement. Countering this misinformation all along the pathway requires a whole-of-society effort. Could the NHS, which faces the whole of society, be the vehicle for engaging the anti-vaxxer movements in its present state?

*Adam Peggs* discusses the recent ascent of the housing emergency back up the political agenda, taking a materialist view on the genesis of the current crisis. Since the 1970s, the state has shifted away from its role as manager of a mixed housing economy to take on the role of engineer, particularly on behalf of financial actors. This is leading to a tendency toward the financialisation of all housing, with social housing now at the forefront of this trend.

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### Notes

1. B. Schwarz, 'Editorial: The scandal of contemporary universities', *Soundings* 69, Summer 2018. Free to view at: <https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2018-issue-69/abstract-7578/>.
2. Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Ni ancio lu, 'Introduction: Decolonising the University?' in Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Ni ancio lu (eds), *Decolonising the University*, London, Pluto Press, pp1-15, p3.
3. Through articles written for publications such as *The London Review of Books*, and brought together in two collections, *What Are Universities For?* (Penguin 2012) and *Speaking of Universities* (Verso 2018).
4. Robin D.G. Kelley, 'Over the Rainbow: Third World studies against the neoliberal turn', in Aziz Choudry and Salim Vally (eds), *Reflections on Knowledge, Learning and Social Movements: History's School*, London, Routledge 2017, pp205-22.

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5. Julie Cupples, 'No Sense of Place: Geoscientization and the epistemic erasure of Geography', *New Zealand Geographer*, Vol 76 No 1, pp3-13.
6. University of Leicester UCU, 'On the likelihood of being made redundant from the School of Business': <https://www.uculeicester.org.uk/on-the-likelihood-of-being-made-redundant-from-the-school-of-business/>.
7. Ella Creamer, 'Professor Hakim Adi shortlisted for prestigious Wolfson award', *Guardian*, 5 September 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/sep/05/professor-hakim-adi-shortlisted-for-prestigious-wolfson-award>.
8. Felicity Callard, 'Replication and reproduction: crises in psychology and academic labour', *Review of General Psychology*, Vol 26 No 2, 2022, pp199-211.
9. Myfanwy Taylor (forthcoming), 'The economic politics of anti-displacement struggle: connecting diverse and community economies research with critical urban studies on the Carpenters Estate, London', *Antipode*.
10. Nick Megoran and Olivia Mason, *Second Class Academic Citizens: the Dehumanizing Effects of Casualisation in Higher Education*, Newcastle/ University College Union, 2020.
11. Farheen Ahmed in conversation with Kirsten Forkert and David Featherstone, 'Solidarity Against the odds: trade union activism in a hostile environment', *Soundings* 82, winter 2022, pp27-46.