

UK universities use coronavirus crisis to make hundreds of temporary staff redundant

By Simon Whelan
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Many UK university staff on fixed-term contracts, visiting lecturers and student support workers have been laid off or informed their contracts will not be renewed.

In recent weeks, three British universities have announced hundreds of temporary contract redundancies in order to make financial savings. The University of Sussex and two from the prestigious Russell Group—the University of Bristol and the University of Newcastle—have cited the coronavirus pandemic as necessitating severe expenditure cuts.

With higher education largely suspended or going online during the pandemic, fear is mounting of precipitous falls in the numbers of international students coming to the UK. This, along with cuts in research grants next year, will cost universities hundreds of millions of pounds.

University budgets are expected to be cut by up to £800 million by autumn 2020, due to lost income from conferences, student accommodation, catering and other associated income streams.

The business model of the British higher education sector is dependent upon highly educated staff who are denied secure employment and must eke out their employment on temporary and zero-hour contracts, where they are paid hourly. More than 50 percent of UK university staff are on temporary and part-time contracts.

Sussex University has issued a document, “Financial Review from Sussex.” The Research Professional News website drew attention to a section on temporary staff, which states: “Non-business critical posts currently held by temporary or agency staff will need to be reviewed and terminated as soon as possible.” The document advises, “Where possible, the tasks should be reassigned to other members of your team or non-critical tasks may need to be temporarily suspended in order to focus on core business activity.”

This means that the workloads of those who remain

employed after departmental staffing levels are reduced will grow exponentially.

The guidance adds that “posts currently held by tutors [and] work carried out by other casual staff, will need to be reviewed in light of forthcoming scheduled teaching and where possible, terminated as soon as possible.” Where tutors are employed on an “open-ended rather than a fixed-term basis,” managers should “discuss with [HR] the process which should be followed.”

Kathryn Telling, a lecturer in sociology at Sussex School of Law, Politics and Sociology, tweeted that she was “genuinely sickened” by the document.

Once the pandemic emerged in the UK, Sussex Vice Chancellor Adam Tickell wasted no time e-mailing the respective heads of departments demanding that finances require “immediate action.” He told departments that cost-cutting in progress prior to the emergence of the pandemic was being accelerated and demanded strict adherence.

Tickell’s e-mail contained a missive from Sussex Director of Finance Allan Spencer to terminate with immediate effect all educators on fixed-term contracts and those hired from employment agencies. All recruitment at Sussex is to be frozen indefinitely. Spencer recommended the immediate inclusion of those job offers made by Sussex’s recruitment, but which had not yet been formally accepted. Such a move is not only callous in the extreme but potentially leaves many educators in limbo.

The University of Bristol have dismissed 84 staff on temporary and short-term contracts. In an e-mail to affected workers, the temporary staffing service manager said their contracts would end early on April 9, due to the pandemic.

A spokesperson for Bristol university said callously, “These staff were given two weeks’ notice instead of the usual one week.”

Prostrating themselves before the employers, the University and College Union (UCU) threatened only to write to Education Secretary Gavin Williamson to politely ask that rather than laying the staff off, universities include them in the job furlough scheme whereby the government picks up 80 percent of their wages.

UCU General Secretary Jo Grady said, “Furlough arrangements should apply to all staff—including those on insecure contracts—and the government should extend the one-year visa extension for NHS staff to cover people working in our colleges and universities.”

Taking their lead from the suggestions made by the UCU, the Bristol spokesperson subsequently informed Cable, a public interest journalism website, “Where we can show as a result of COVID-19 we have had to lay staff off because the work no longer exists we hope to be able to apply for the furlough scheme. Universities have a complex set of arrangements and we require clarification from government about our eligibility to furlough individuals.”

Helen Rokliff is one of the workers who had her employment contract terminated early. She started work in the Bristol Maths Department in November 2019 on a temporary, zero-hour contract, which was due to end on April 30. She told Cable, “They [Bristol Temporary Staffing Service] gave assurance that they would pay until the end of the contract.

“That was about two or three weeks ago, and then about a week later, management told me they were so sorry, but they’ve retracted that and said they are only going to pay until April 9.”

Rockliff contacted the university requesting enrolment in the furlough scheme. “As far as I can see, it is applicable,” Rockliff added. “When I queried them about why they decided not to use it, they responded by saying that they could terminate my contract in a week and that the government guidelines weren’t very clear. I assume they just thought that’s the easiest course of action.”

Ashley Scott was employed on a temporary contract at Bristol for the last four years as a receptionist and administrator through the Temporary Staffing Service. “My contract came to its end just as the lockdown came into place,” Scott told Cable. “It had been rolled over in the past, but that wasn’t to be because of coronavirus. I’m now having to apply for universal credit and that’s proving to be really difficult. I feel like I’m stuck in limbo.”

An internal Bristol University e-mail seen by Cable

explains to staff, “As a worker, your assignments are of a temporary nature, which can be ended earlier than anticipated by giving you one week’s notice. In the circumstances, we have made the difficult decision to review all of our temporary arrangements.”

In another email to faculties at Bristol, Deputy Vice Chancellor Guy Orpen celebrated their efforts in fighting coronavirus. “We can all be proud of the contribution the University community is making to the local, national and global effort; as a leadership team, we will continue to ask what more the University can and should be doing.” A former Bristol university employee responded, “I was wondering about sending them an email saying I’m trying to get you to extend your care for the community to your own staff!”

Bristol’s top brass will not be facing the loss of their privileged status. Vice Chancellor Hugh Brady enjoyed a salary increase of £9,000 last year, from £373,000 to £382,000. Half a dozen UK university vice chancellors are paid in excess of £500,000, and more than half earn at least £300,000 per year.

The UCU has a long record of suppressing the fight of its members against attacks on their jobs, terms, conditions and pensions. Opposed to rallying educators and university staff against the redundancies and accelerating casualisation of the Higher Education sector, Grady claimed, “Short-term reactions will have long-term consequences and any moves to reduce hours or make staff redundant are premature, unacceptable” as they were “counter to the government’s key aim of retaining jobs.”

This refers to the same Tory government that, in alliance with the universities, is seeking to slash the pay, pensions and livelihoods of university staff. Not opposed in principle to the cuts, Grady pleaded, “Universities should suspend any dismissals *for at least the period of the crisis and then review staff needs*. Staff dismissed at this time will find it almost impossible to secure alternative employment whilst the crisis continues.”

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