

Building equitable redundancy systems: Policy recommendations for UK universities' Social Science and Humanities departments

Executive Summary

UK universities are increasingly turning to redundancy programmes as financial pressures intensify, as the procedural processes governing universities prioritise economic justification and sectoral preference over equal education. Institutions must consult affected employees however, significant discretion is granted to employers to define selection criteria, redundancy pools and “at-risk” roles. Therefore, in practice, this allows procedures to be shaped by market logics that systematically disadvantage Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) faculties, whose contributions are less easily monetised than STEM disciplines, which are externally funded. This structural imbalance has produced highly unequal outcomes, with SSH staff often the first to be targeted for redundancies. These losses erode academic diversity, weaken critical inquiry, and restrict students’ access to the analytical and civic skills essential for an equitable, democratic society. Despite funding support from programmes such as the ARHC, procedural discrepancies still unfairly disadvantage SSH faculties and academics in the UK due to their structural imbalances.

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ISSUES

“Redundancy refers to a dismissal that happens not because of the worker’s conduct or performance, but because the employer closes or relocates the business, or no longer needs as many employees to do that kind of work.”

A redundancy is “a potentially unlawful dismissal”, which has been developed and applied across universities in the UK.

-Employment Rights Act 1996, s.139

Issue 1: Financial Pressures

Financial pressures disproportionately impact SSH faculties due to a reduction in funding per student. This has occurred for multiple reasons. For instance **funding for higher education** has been cut back[1] caused by Brexit and government policy revision, reducing the public subsidies which many universities have traditionally depended on. **The cap on domestic tuition fees** has been maintained for ten years[2], despite the inflation, which means universities cannot increase home-student fees to keep pace with rising costs. Universities are facing **a steep decline in income from international students**, which alone has been linked to an estimated £5 billion economic loss[3].

The most visible consequence of these financial pressures is the discontinuation of SSH departments. Staff of SSH faculties that are discontinued face sudden loss of income and serious deterioration to mental health[4]; even those who survive tend to experience what is coined as “survivor syndrome”[5], marked by professional isolation and the erosion of their academic identity and sense of purpose.

[1] Joe Lewis and Paul Bolton, 'The Post-18 Education and Funding Review: Government conclusion' (House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 29 April 2022)

[2] Paul Bolton, 'Higher education funding in England' (House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 27 January 2021)

[3] Universities UK International, 'The costs and benefits of international higher education students to the UK economy' (17 May 2023, 3 December 2024)

[4] Rebecca Harrison and David Harvie, 'Universities Degraded: Staff Experiences & Employer Practices of Redundancies in UK Higher Education' (11 June 2025)

[5] David M Noer, *Healing the Wounds: Overcoming the Trauma of Layoffs and Revitalizing Downsized Organizations* (2nd edn, Jossey-Bass 2009)

ISSUES

Issue 2: disproportionate redundancy across departments

Current evaluation frameworks for universities departments rely on three indicators: research outputs, graduate earnings and cost-revenue calculations. While presented as neutral, these metrics systematically disadvantage SSH compared with STEM disciplines[6].

Research output is assessed through the volume of publications, citations and impact measures. This design favours STEM research with more standardized outputs. However, these slower and non-quantifiable forms of outcomes are undervalued, placing SSH departments at a structural disadvantage in performance evaluation.

Graduate outcomes are increasingly measured through earnings. As labour markets reward roles with higher salaries, relying on income as the main measure of educational value means that disciplines linked to higher-paying jobs are consistently rated as more successful[7], while those associated with lower average pay are judged as less valuable. SSH graduates, who frequently develop broad and transferable skills and move into diverse sectors, are therefore considered as less successful, despite evidence of strong long-term employability and adaptability[8].

Cost-revenue models compare the operational cost of a department with the income it generates. SSH teaching depends on small-group seminars, high contact hours and intensive supervision, making staffing costs highly visible. STEM programmes, by contrast, often benefit from external research funding and targeted public investment, which offsets their real resource intensity.

Together, these indicators construct SSH as financially inefficient and underperforming.

"My departments were very, very good at what they did, and quite clearly, none of that is valued by our employer."

Universities Degraded: Staff Experiences & Employer Practices of Redundancies in UK Higher Education

[6] James Wilsdon and others, *The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management* (HEFCE 2015)

[7] Jack Britton and others, 'How English domiciled graduate earnings vary with gender, institution attended, subject and socio-economic background (Executive Summary)' (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 13 April 2016)

[8] British Academy, 'Qualified for the Future: Quantifying Demand for Arts, Humanities and Social Science Skills' (British Academy 2020)

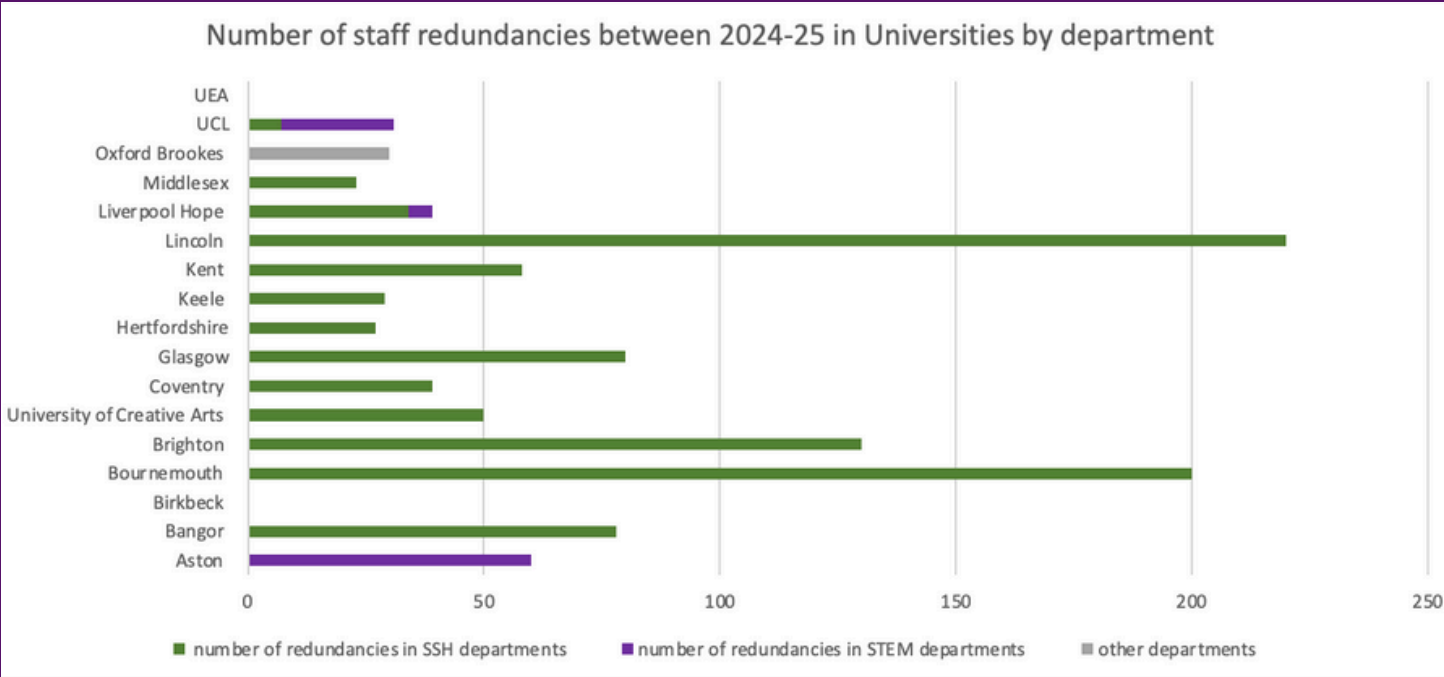
[9] R Harrison and D Harvie, 'Universities Degraded: Staff Experiences & Employer Practices of Redundancies in UK Higher Education' (11 June 2025)

[10] 'UK HE Shrinking' (23 March 2024) <<https://qmul.org/qmul-transformation/uk-he-shrinking/>>

Issue 3: voluntary severance scheme

"Voluntary" is not always truly voluntary. Although universities frame severance schemes as "voluntary," the announcements are often made in the context of financial constraints, planned cost-cutting, and warnings of a potentially "worse" future scenario. This creates an environment in which staff may feel indirectly pressured: if they do not apply for voluntary severance now, they may be more likely to face compulsory redundancy later. According to the Survey for UCU Members on HE Redundancies, **54% of senior management teams are bullying staff into applying for voluntary severance and/or voluntary redundancy.**[9] The impact of VS schemes is that they exacerbate procedural unfairness through disproportionately creating redundancies in SSH faculties. For example, Bournemouth University's voluntary severance scheme introduced drastic research-hour cuts and the closure of programmes including English, Politics, and Anthropology.[10]

University	Have they implemnted voluntary severance schemes?	Have they implemented compulsory redundancies?
Birmingham	Yes (as of October 2024)	No
Brighton	Yes (targeting Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences)	No
Cardiff	On the table	No
Durham	Yes (between November 2023-February 2024)	No (but hasn't been rules out)
Edinburgh	Yes (as of January 2025)	Yes (implemented in October 2025)
Exeter	Yes (declared that it would be the last 'generous' scheme)	No
Glasgow	Yes	No
Nottingham	Yes	Yes
Oxford Brookes	Yes	Yes (just in the Music department)
RHUL	Yes (as of March 2025)	No
Warwick	Yes (as of November 2025)	No
York	Yes (in 2023 and 2024)	Yes (of 30 academic posts)



RECOMMENDATIONS

Financial restructuring: UCU branches should establish a group of individuals responsible for monitoring the institution's financial projections, including formulating proposals for change, drafting an alternative financial strategy, and focusing on reducing non-payroll expenditure. The UCU's focus on financial monitoring would ensure that funding for SSH faculties is delivered efficiently and equitably, thereby promoting financial equality across education faculties.

Graduate Funding Reform: Targeted interventions, such as the "post-PhD transition fund" proposed by Gemma Tidman, offer temporary financial support to doctoral graduates. Tidman proposes a "research tax credits scheme" to encourage non-university employers to recruit PhD graduates, thereby facilitating collaboration between academia and industry. These projects seek to enhance employment prospects for SSH postgraduates and connect academia with industry. [11]

Students and staff alliances strongly influence governance decisions. Consequently, enhancing student collaboration ensures that students understand the sectoral risks associated with SSH redundancies. [12]

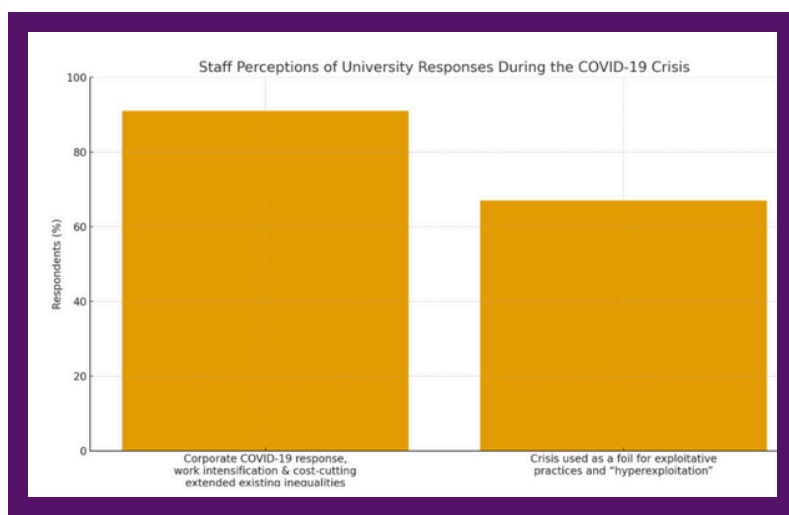
Reforming consultation procedures: Require universities to carry out a formal Educational Impact Assessment (EIA). Consultations often occur after decisions are predetermined. This means staff cannot meaningfully influence proposals before proposing staff cuts or course closures. [13] The EIA would include:

- Assessment of impacts on widening participation, mainly where SSH departments disproportionately serve first-generation and commuter students.
- Analysis of research capacity impact (particularly in disciplines without external grant income).
- Requirement to publish the assessment and subject it to external review before any redundancy consultation can begin

Re-framing the purpose of voluntary severance schemes

- Institutions should avoid framing the VS scheme as a cost-cutting mechanism. Encouraging redeployment ensures that employees and employers believe it can be undertaken by the employee, suitably to their career path, with training, if necessary.

Universities that elect to implement these VS schemes must establish transparent VS criteria to avert discrimination and provide equitable access, in accordance with equality impact assessment obligations. This would guarantee the absence of sectoral bias and prevent VS plans from indiscriminately affecting SSH faculties. There must be a ban on language suggesting that mandatory redundancies will ensue if an inadequate number of staff volunteer. [14]



[11] Christensen KB, 'Assessing the Decline in Academic Humanities Positions at Higher Educational Institutions in the United Kingdom 2014-2022: A Quantitative Study Assessing the Decline in Academic Humanities Positions at Higher Educational Institutions in The' (23 August 2024)]

[12] LeBihan J, Lowe T and Marie J, 'Considerations of the Challenges, Conflicts and Competitions When Expanding Student-Staff Partnerships across an Institution: Perspectives from Three UK Universities.' (2018) 1 Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education 173

[13] Group WB, 'Impact Evaluations for Education Policy' (World Bank18 October 2024) <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/impact-evaluations>>

[14] 'CHALLENGING REDUNDANCIES a UCU Bargaining Guide for Branches' <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/3076/Challenging-redundancies-in-higher-education---A-UCU-briefing-document/pdf/ucu_challengingredundancies_apr13.pdf>.

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