

Universities in crisis

Introduction

Universities are anchors of communities and economies. They educate the future workforce and train the key workers needed to maintain public services, like nurses, social workers, and paramedics. Education is also a public good in and of itself.

UNISON members work in a variety of roles that keep Scotland's universities running, including student support, administration, facilities management, and library work. These staff members are bearing the brunt of a financial crisis that they did not create and are facing continued pay erosion and widespread threats of job losses. This briefing summarises the financial crisis facing the sector and UNISON's position on what needs to change to ensure Scotland's universities thrive, and their staff are given the decent pay and conditions they deserve.

Context

Scotland's universities are in crisis, the foundations of which lie in chronic underfunding. Scottish students do not pay tuition fees, but the funding the Scottish government pays universities per student is far below what it costs to teach that student. Universities Scotland reports that the amount of public funding invested in every Scottish undergraduate place was 22% less in 2024/25 than it was in 2013/14.

This has meant that universities have come to rely upon international students, who pay far higher fees than home students, to balance the books. A broken business model has emerged, which positions education as an international product for sale, and is financially dependent on high numbers of international students. Numbers of international students have fallen sharply in recent years, leading to a serious financial crisis. This crisis, and the consequences of business-driven cultures that have emerged at some universities, has led to deep cuts. University staff have been left to bear the brunt of this crisis, which is not of their own making.

Cuts and job losses

University and college support staff working in administration, student support, cleaning and facilities management, and libraries, keep establishments running, and yet are bearing the brunt of this crisis. Low-paid education staff are facing continued pay erosion and widespread threats of job losses.

- UNISON members at Glasgow Caledonian University have been on strike over job cuts and the threat of compulsory redundancies
- In May 2026, Aberdeen University announced over 100 jobs could be lost as part of a £10m savings package.
- Dundee University has reduced its workforce by around 30% in 2 years - nearly 1000 people - and has only survived with £62m of emergency Scottish government aid
- Strathclyde University has warned of 70 jobs losses as it looks to cut £35m from its budget.



KEY POINTS:

- **Chronic underfunding of Scotland's universities has led to a serious financial crisis in the sector**
- **University staff pay has been devalued by more than 25% since 2008**
- **Some university bosses are still earning six figure salaries while low-paid jobs and courses are cut**
- **A business-driven culture that positions education as an international product has taken hold in some settings**



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- Thousands of staff at the University of Edinburgh have begun five weeks of strikes over £140m cuts

The impact of these losses is significant for the communities in which these universities are based. Each cuts package represents a sudden loss of a high number of jobs concentrated in one city or town. The knock-on impact of this for local economies is comparable to the closure of a medium-sized workplace. Yet, the Scottish government has shown no urgency to either stem these losses or rethink the funding model for Scotland's universities that is so clearly broken.

Business driven education

The blame for the financial position of many of Scotland's universities cannot be put down to falling numbers of international students alone. There were serious questions to be asked after the near collapse of Dundee University. While underfunding of universities has no doubt led to a business-focused operating model, it seems a business-driven culture has spiralled out of control at some institutions.

Last summer, Aberdeen University announced that the university will open a campus in Mumbai. This is while the university also confirmed it will seek to make £10m in savings, with courses cut and over 100 jobs lost. A business model which expands the campus of an ancient Scottish university in India, while shrinking the institution's ancient academic footprint in Aberdeen, is fundamentally broken.

Pay

University staff pay has been devalued by more than 25% since 2008. Pay cuts and lack of funding for the higher education sector have led to chronic short staffing. This is against the backdrop of university bosses receiving huge salaries, and free homes. University of Edinburgh Vice Chancellor Peter Mathieson earns £420,000, plus expenses while overseeing a huge cuts programme.

In April, support staff including administrators, cleaners, receptionists and librarians at the Glasgow School of Art and Glasgow University voted to strike after university bosses refused to improve on a below inflation 1.4% pay increase.

Public services

Universities are where the nurses, social workers, and town planners of tomorrow are trained. UCAS data shows that 3620 students were accepted to study nursing and midwifery courses in Scotland in 2025, below the Scottish government target of 4891. In 2024/25, the Scottish government moved to 'soft' targets for nursing and midwifery intake, in recognition of the instability around these numbers. Sustainable universities today are vital for the sustainable public services of tomorrow.

UNISON approach

- Make investing in further and higher education a priority
- Adequately fund higher education so that universities are not run as international businesses, but for the public good
- Keep higher education free with no tuition fees
- Reflect the value of the low-paid staff who keep Scotland's further and higher education establishments running with fair pay and stable contracts
- Take action on the inflated salaries and perks of university bosses

Action for branches

- Encourage your colleagues to join UNISON - there has never been a more important time to be a member
- Share the information in this briefing on social media and in recruitment materials

Additional reading

- [Financial sustainability – a briefing for the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee: Universities Scotland](#)
- [Priorities for higher education funding in Scotland: findings from a citizens' jury – Ipsos for Carnegie Education Fund](#)
- [UCAS data: end of undergraduate application cycle 2025](#)



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