

The Humanities at Risk: A Statement from the Scottish Society for Northern Studies

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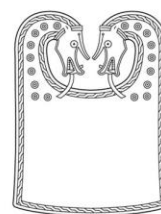
Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom are home to an exceptional tradition of academic research and teaching in the Humanities and Social Sciences, whose diversity and depth has long enriched our understanding of the histories, cultures, and languages of these islands and the wider world. This same tradition currently finds itself under severe and sustained threat.

A combination of structural deficits, increased costs, and the corporatisation and marketisation of the academic sector has led numerous universities across Scotland – and the UK as a whole – to announce considerable cuts to their research, teaching, and engagement activities in recent years.¹ As many as half of all universities have already moved towards cutting jobs and student programmes,² with many tens of thousands of university positions considered to be at risk.³

The Humanities and Social Sciences have been especially hard hit by these measures, with more than 4,000 subject-specific academic posts axed during 2024 alone.⁴ As programmes have been curtailed or withdrawn entirely, significant ‘cold spots’ have emerged throughout the UK and its constituent countries for the provision of subjects like Languages and Area Studies, Anthropology, and Classics, whilst History, Celtic Studies, and English are likewise considered at risk.⁵ The resulting lack of access to local and regional education particularly affects rural and disadvantaged areas, and is projected to exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities across the length and breadth of Britain and Northern Ireland.⁶

The university sector is a significant contributor to the economy writ large: with a total annual impact of over £265 billion, every pound of public money put into higher education is returned fourteen-fold into the economy.⁷ In Scotland alone, universities support well over 50,000 jobs, sustaining entire local communities in the process.⁸ These are not merely academic bodies; they are also cornerstones of social cohesion, innovation, and economic prosperity. At the same time, Arts, Humanities, and Social Science graduates are seen to be especially versatile and in demand across a variety of industries, whilst being resilient to broader economic upheavals.⁹

Nevertheless, those embarking on a Humanities or Social Sciences degree now enter an academic system that is buckling under the pressures of a financial model no longer fit for service. A system in which institutions, anxious to retain student numbers, have shifted ever greater pedagogical and administrative responsibilities onto increasingly shorthanded and overburdened workforces, even as salaries have seen significant cuts in real value over the past decades.¹⁰ Students, in turn, find themselves with fewer options for modules and programmes, whilst having to contend with larger class sizes, less personal support, and a reduced overall quality of education.



Faced with this growing crisis, successive UK governments and their devolved counterparts have been reluctant to commit to structured plans for long-term sector sustainability, whilst maintaining a position that institutions themselves are primarily responsible for their finances.¹¹ As current UK government policy has favoured subjects aligned with its strategic economic and industrial priorities, the longer-term security of the Humanities and Social Sciences within Higher Education has been further imperilled.¹²

These issues directly impact university programmes based in (and focused on) Scotland, including those feeding into the work of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies. As such, in sounding the alarm about the direction and scale of change affecting Higher Education, the Society joins a growing chorus of like-minded organisations in Scotland and across the UK. If current trends continue unchecked, their consequences will be dire, taking generations to mediate or reverse. By reducing provision across the Humanities and Social Sciences, we will lose more than jobs and degree programmes; we risk depriving future generations of essential knowledge, skills, and wisdom, whilst making Scotland, and the United Kingdom as a whole, a less attractive and desirable place to teach, learn, work, and live.

We have to alter course, or we will all be so much the poorer for it.

The Trustees of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies

¹ House of Commons (Education Committee), *Higher Education and Funding: Threat of Insolvency and International Students*, Ninth Report of Session 2024–26 (London: 2026), 21–46, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/52983/documents/295982/default/>; Future Framework for Universities, A Funding Gap Analysis of Scotland's University Sector (Edinburgh: 2026), <https://www.futureframework.scot/pillars/funding-gap-analysis>.

² Universities UK, 'Universities grip financial crisis – but at what cost to the nation?', 10 Oct 2025, <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/creating-voice-our-members/media-releases/universities-grip-financial-crisis-what>.

³ Patrick Jack, 'Do UK university finances justify the redundancy wave – or v-c pay?', *Times Higher Education*, 26 May 2026, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/liverpool.idm.oclc.org/depth/do-uk-university-finances-justify-redundancy-wave-or-v-c-pay>.

⁴ Anna Bawden and Sally Weale, 'Humanities among degrees being "extinguished" by hard-up universities', *The Guardian*, 14 Jul 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2026/jul/14/university-job-cuts-humanities-social-sciences>.

⁵ British Academy, *Cold spots: Mapping inequality in SHAPE provision in UK higher education* (London: 2025), 23–34, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/cold-spots-mapping-inequality-in-shape-provision-in-uk-higher-education/>.

⁶ Helen Packer, 'Humanities and arts degrees disappearing in parts of UK', *Times Higher Education*, 10 Sep 2025, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/humanities-and-arts-degrees-disappearing-parts-uk>.

⁷ London Economics, *The economic impact of higher education teaching, research, and innovation: Report for Universities UK* (London: 2024), 48, <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2024-09/LE-UUK-Impact-of-university-TL-and-RI-Final-Report.pdf>

⁸ Higher Education Statistics Agency, 'Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2024/25', 19 Feb 2026, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-02-2026/sb274-higher-education-staff-statistics>.

⁹ British Academy, *Qualified for the Future: Quantifying Demand for Arts, Humanities and Social Science Skills* (London: 2020), <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/>.

¹⁰ University and College Union, 'Value of university staff pay has plummeted in last decade, employers' own research reveals', 4 Oct 2019, <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10342/Value-of-university-staff-pay-has-plummeted-in-last-decade-employers-own-research-reveals>

¹¹ House of Commons (Education Committee), *Higher Education and Funding: Threat of Insolvency and International Students*, Ninth Report of Session 2024–26 (London: 2026), 2, 6, 8, 13, 18, 25, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/54398/documents/302177/default/>.

¹² UK Government (Labour Market Evidence Group), 'Assessment of priority skills to 2030', 5 Nov 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030>.