

# Edinburgh University in crisis amid strikes, boycotts and 'toxic' cuts

With some staff staging a marking and assessment boycott after warnings of a 'summer of mass redundancies', graduating students fear years of hard work will be wasted

Helen Puttick and James Reinhardt

When Molly Rose Barrow moved from her home in Bromley, south London, to take up a place at Edinburgh University, she was looking forward to the "global standard" of education. Four years on, the 22-year-old doesn't know if she will come away with a completed degree.

A final-year student in the university's school of history, classics and archaeology, Barrow is meant to be just weeks away from graduating.

However, a protracted marking and assessment boycott at the university has left her feeling "utterly petrified" that she will lose her Masters offer in modern British history at Cambridge. She has not explicitly been told her dissertation will be marked and, in the past two months, has experienced days where all lectures have been cancelled due to strikes.

"Students are powerless," Barrow said, adding: "The lack of support is upsetting and underwhelming."

It is one in a series of disputes that have shaken the prestigious sandstone pillars of Edinburgh, a university repeatedly ranked as one of the top 50 higher education establishments in the world.

There is a stand-off between staff and management at the 443-year-old institution, which educated Charles Darwin, inventor Alexander Graham Bell and journalist Laura Kuennsberg.

While it is cited as the third-richest university in the UK after Oxford and Cambridge, it is pursuing £140 million in cuts through a process academics said "destroys morale".

Members of the University and College Union (UCU) are staging the marking and assessment boycott after being told they face a "summer of mass redundancies". As many as 2,000 jobs, they say, could ultimately be axed.

Now the university management has withdrawn the entire salaries of all those refusing to mark student work and in the eyes of staff it is forcing a strike.

This escalating deadlock is among the confrontations affecting those trying to learn.

The university's Justice for Palestine Society (JPS) has repeatedly occupied major buildings in protest at Edinburgh University investments, resulting in lectures being moved or cancelled at short notice. At the start of April, they blocked the entrance to the landmark Old College building, where the law school is based, for days.

Last July, UN special rapporteur Francesca Albanese flagged Edinburgh University for its "financial entanglement" with Israel. The university, however, described its responsible investment policy to The Sunday Times as "sector leading".

Ash Scholz, president of Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA), applauded the way students and staff speak up, but warned "some students feel threatened" by demonstrations. The way the university responds to the protests at times, Scholz added, "only contributes further to a divisive situation on campus".

Student numbers have exploded at Edinburgh, up from 35,255 in 2014-15 to 49,640 in 2024-25, which lecturers say impacts on teaching and learning.

Sophia Woodman, president of the UCU Edinburgh Branch Committee, said of her sociology department: "We have seen expanding class sizes and fewer staff over time even before the cuts ... Students do not get enough contact time. You can only imagine that the direction of travel is towards even bigger classes and fewer staff to teach them, and learning is about relationships.

"You cannot have a relationship with 90 students."

Analysis of the National Student Survey already shows low satisfaction rates and Edinburgh is second from bottom for teaching quality, even though it ranks 25th in The Times latest university guide overall and 11th for quality research. The latest annual comparisons by analytics firm Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) placed Edinburgh 34th worldwide.

Freshers studying biomedical sciences told The Sunday Times they came with high expectations, and while these standards were often met, there had been disappointments. "Some lectures are very basic," said one first-year undergraduate. "Sometimes things are just a bit vague, and the labs (practicals) aren't really explained properly."

Final-year students in the school of engineering said they had enjoyed their five years, but there was one course that had been poorly organised and there had been worry sparked by industrial action.

Mark Slater, a PhD student and a paid tutor at the university, said he didn't know if his doctorate would be supervised next year or if his tutoring job would continue.

"I see members of staff looking just visibly exhausted, who I know are the ones stressing," he said.

Woodman estimated the university has already lost about 1,000 staff, with



The university's quest to find £140 million in savings is leading to thousands of jobs being axed, with students protesting in sympathy with demoralised staff

through", said one senior academic, adding: "I think greater transparency and much more careful drafting of communications are needed."

Mathieson, a kidney medicine specialist, has been principal since 2018. Last year, he told a Holyrood committee he did not know how much he earned, but it was about £350,000 plus a pension supplement.

The university told The Sunday Times that claims Mathieson had not thought carefully about Edinburgh's status were "nonsense and categorically untrue".

A university spokesperson said: "The principal has repeatedly made the case to government for investment in our valuable higher education sector and has engaged with media on this topic frequently. Every decision is taken with the utmost commitment to supporting the institution's best interests for now and the future, and to communicating openly and honestly with our community."

They added: "This is an uncertain time for university staff and students across the country as many institutions are navigating a period of significant financial challenge. We have been upfront and open about the pressures we are facing at Edinburgh. It costs more than £120 million a month to run our university and, while we are not currently operating at a loss, our costs are rising faster than our income. The university is therefore making the difficult, but responsible decisions necessary to secure our footing as an efficient and resilient institution that is equipped to fulfil its academic mission for the long term."

790 going between December 2024 and December last year.

Nik Matheou, lecturer in global medieval history, described voluntary redundancies being "encouraged through what are called 'protected conversations'" – chats where line managers strongly imply that people should consider taking a deal. "It creates a really toxic atmosphere within departments and destroys morale," he said.

Edinburgh is among many UK-wide universities seeking savings amid significant cost pressures. Visa issues affecting the international students market, tuition fees rising slower than inflation and the cost of living crisis eroding the value of income sources such as grants, are among the problems. The Scottish government pays the fees for Scottish undergraduates to attend university, but it has been estimated that this leaves an estimated 25 per cent funding shortfall per student compared to other UK nations.

Dundee University has received more than £60 million in bailout funding from the Scottish government after it struggled to plug a financial hole. Last year, Scotland's charity regulator launched an investigation into Dundee, but only after the institution's financial collapse.

Lindsay Paterson, emeritus professor of education policy at Edinburgh, noted that the university had been through cuts before, particularly under former principal the late Lord Sutherland of Houndwood – but suggested relationships between managers and academics were better at that time.

Now, he said, there was a sense "that this is an institution that is drifting, that

also creating uncertainty for students, unsure if parts of their curriculum will disappear next semester.

Woodman said a programme that attracted overseas students exploring nationalism had been scrapped from September. Target thresholds have been set for participation to determine which courses are viable, staff have said. A total of 13 postgraduate courses at Edinburgh Medical School are also set to shut, starting from the end of this academic year.

Historian Tom Devine, emeritus professor at Edinburgh University, said he still viewed the establishment as world-class, but feared its reputation was under threat. He claimed inept decisions have been taken, including ballooning capital expenditure and failure to control rising staff costs.

"As far as I am aware, no admission or fault or apologies or resignations have been forthcoming from those who currently govern Edinburgh," he said. "I

suspect, therefore, that the judgment of history in the future on their regime is likely to be merciless."

Barrow, alongside a group of her fellow fourth-years, has sent an open letter to Sir Peter Mathieson, the university principal, and the senior leadership team calling for them to listen to students.

Students and staff both comment that communication from the top of the institution lands badly. Emails from Mathieson had "not been well thought



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it's being driven by financial targets, that the leadership is not interested in research and doesn't understand teaching and is not actually, despite the slogans, particularly committed to either Edinburgh, Scotland or the UK".

He added: "It is like [they are] managing the Oxford Street branch of Marks & Spencer."

Difficult relationships between staff and management have been noted by others, too.

The launch of a new finance system called People and Money did not go to plan, causing delays in settling thousands of invoices. A report produced for the university by an external consultant in 2023 found that a lack of trust between staff and management existed before it was rolled out, but was exacerbated by the IT project. Those who tried to provide constructive feedback felt they were considered disruptive or ignored.

Many staff at Edinburgh University are not represented by the UCU. However, it has about 3,000 members and recorded its third successive mandate for action at the end of March when 90 per cent of participants voted for measures short of a strike and 84 per cent for strike action.

Scholz is worried that students, like Barrow, will be given blank pieces of paper at graduation ceremonies this summer because coursework and assessments have not been marked. This happened in 2023, when there was a UK-wide UCU marking strike.

EUSA said it is working with the Home Office to protect international students' visas that require marked assignments, and remains worried that a lack of degrees could affect graduates applying for jobs.

"I'm genuinely concerned that this situation could affect hundreds of students over the coming summer," said Scholz.

The prospect of courses being pulled is

BACK OF A NAPKIN



FIRST SALE