

# The university and the plan

## Reflections from Vienna

The immediate causes of the current protests by students, lecturers and academic researchers in Europe are contingent; they are directed at individual educational institutions or administrators, and the demands they make are capable of being met over the short term.\* But on a second level, one that cannot be separated from the immediate events, protestors are concerned with fundamental changes made to systems of education and training in circumstances of massive underfunding, processes of de-democratization and ‘practical mistakes’ made in introducing new BA and MA structures as a result of the Bologna guidelines. In relation to this, protest is generally directed at ministries of education and research or at governments, and it is possible to imagine that demands made at this level could essentially be met and acted upon over the medium term – assuming, that is, that the demands are taken seriously. This second level in particular has received a great deal of attention and vocal support in the media, although uncommitted declarations of solidarity have often also had the effect of weakening its impact.

A third level, which was part of the protests from the beginning, was either widely ignored by the media or at best dismissed as mere fantasy: it includes everything that the rather vague demands for ‘changing the whole of society’ tried to express. There was a reason why these terms were so imprecise: put simply, it has now become difficult to identify and describe exactly what the ‘whole’ social structures are that need to be changed. In what follows, we attempt to analyse the current conflicts and paradoxes in order to formulate more concrete demands at this third level – in the hope that starting points for a theory of society might emerge.

At the current stage of capitalist socialization in Western countries, there remain only a few areas of life where individuals can become aware of their common political interests with others – that is to say, of their political and economic interests. Interest groups of

the kind commonly recognized by the state, such as employees’ organizations, student unions, trade unions and reform-oriented parties, rarely prove to be the initiators of social struggles, not least because their own bureaucratic structures are designed to balance corporate interests. When struggles do arise, they generally do so outside of them. This is partly because economic competition, consumer individualism and the reorganization of industrial production have helped create a situation where people either no longer go through, or are no longer aware of, the classic collective experiences of politicization. But there is another reason as well: as fields of production and work become increasingly immaterial, demand has risen for workers with uniquely individual abilities – indeed, with carefully cultivated idiosyncrasies, stylish quirks and personal (physical) attractiveness. The self is no longer a place of retreat but a productive force, obliged to operate on deregulated markets, deploying as many unique selling points as possible. The result is an encroachment of the working day into traditional leisure activities: going to parties, concerts, exhibitions and the cinema or engaging in the never-ending (in)voluntary rounds of networking become mere opportunities for honing this constructed self further.

These processes of individualization and compulsory Bohemianization gradually take hold of the entire individual, affecting ever more areas of his or her life. Those subject to them must maintain a good mood in order to appear creative and original – survival depends on it. As semi-self-employed small entrepreneurs running their own businesses, or as precariously employed workers, they represent the new proletariat of deregulation and neoliberalism. The situation in the universities, by contrast, looks very different. Here it is not deregulation that is the problem, but increasing regulation; the trend is not towards compulsory self-invention and self-management, but external controls, bureaucracy and the dumbing-down of courses.

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\* This is a translation of a German-language article from a reader *Was passiert? Stellungnahme zur Lage der Universität*, in the series *Unbedingte Universitäten*, edited by a Munich-based student collective and published by Diaphanes, Zurich/Berlin, 2010. The text reflects discussions in January 2010 among several people who, in one way or another, are involved in the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna. Contributors to this version include Fahim Amir, Sabeth Buchmann, Diedrich Diederichsen, Tom Holert, Jakob Kramertisch and Ruth Sonderegger.

The sociologist and management consultant Armin Nassehi recently wrote an article (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 November 2009) supporting the students' protests 'in their substantive points', while at the same time denying that there is any connection between the Bologna system – which he considers to have been rightly criticized – and neoliberalism. Instead, he saw the much-criticized mania for regulation more as a return to socialist five-year plans. Even Adam Soboczynski, in his otherwise very sympathetic tribute to the old-school system's tradition of long-term study (*Die Zeit*, 26 November 2009), found that the Bologna regulations smacked of Leninism.

Drawing analogies between educational and economic policy on the basis of structural similarities is a category error that is commonly made. For, in the neoliberal paradigm, the increasing regulation of universities and decreasing regulation of money flows go together, in much the same way as the increasing control of migration goes together with decreasing control of capital movements. Both are different ways of serving the same end, namely of intensifying exploitation and reducing costs.

The only difference is that monadized, independent micro-entrepreneurs can more effectively be exploited outside the colleges, while within universities cost reduction can only be achieved by bureaucratic methods. Of course, this principally applies to the large state-run universities, whose unmanageable size and organizational overload constantly force them to produce guidelines that can guarantee the quality of their industrially manufactured educational product, including evaluations, credit points, micro-managed curricula, and so on.

Thus while post-Fordist deregulation is everywhere on the offensive, and while the function of disciplining and controlling labour is no longer exercised by bosses and authority figures but has become internalized by working subjects themselves, a neo-Fordist system of discipline is, as it were, gradually being imposed in the universities, with the Bologna process as part of it. However, this also has the result that, like factory workers of the past, students are now able to experience themselves and those in the same position as them as a class. While exploitative relationships are elsewhere becoming increasingly less visible, they have become strikingly more so in the large-scale university's structures of power and control.

The advantage of this visibility as a basis for mobilizing students and other participants within universities has been clearly demonstrated; at the same time, there is little doubt it has also contributed to a

readiness to express solidarity with other movements outside them. Its disadvantage is that the unevenness of these developments makes them hard to express in the form of demands. Anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical demands – however justified they may be against Bologna and the transformation of universities into factories – are, in the cultural industries outside the universities, instances of preaching to the converted. Thus, for example, Magnus Klaue could write in the weekly newspaper *Freitag* (25 November 2009) that the students were demanding what was effectively already happening.

This unevenness characterizes not only the difference between the neo-Fordist Bologna university and post-Fordist (cultural) work, but also the position of artistic and academic staff, of lecturers and researchers. Increasingly partially and precariously employed, the latter are now responsible for finding their own funding, attracting external funds and promoting themselves through constant networking. In this sense, they too are subject to experiences similar to other cognitive proletarians. At the same time, however, they are part of the university's management and are involved in implementing the reforms that are turning it into a factory; entangled in its functions of control, they develop phantom professorial traits. Social and political demands must take the ambiguity of their position into account; if they don't, they run the risk of degenerating into a nostalgic, anti-authoritarian spectacle of defiance, consoling themselves with empty gestures of support and solidarity from the media.

At the same time, we should be asking whether the moment has come to reconsider and revise the nature of the 'clear' public demands that are regularly being called for, but whose political effectiveness is arguable. Long before the start of the protests, work had begun on an intensive critique of contemporary conditions; it argued that such phenomena as deregulation and disciplining, the pressure to stand out and the pressure to conform, demands for excellence and the precarization of work, the propaganda of labour mobility and the control of that mobility, the myth of horizontal hierarchies and the reality of dismantling democratic forms, were not contradictory but rather complementary processes. The analysis is of the circumstances in which hegemonic powers are attempting to promote the 'knowledge society' and 'creative cities' as ideological role models for the present political and economic reality. It has developed practices and slogans that both the media and politicians have been quick to denounce as absurdly unrealistic demands for grassroots democracy. In so doing, these practices and slogans best

demonstrate how the production of a theory of society works – namely, by (and through) the discussion of very concrete problems of discrimination and exclusion, by organizing learning, teaching and everyday life, and by observing administrative and managerial practices and their legitimating discourses.

The self-organized production of political critique and self-empowering gestures made in and through educational institutions are themselves a form of social and political theory. This new production of activity is not least a reaction to the neoliberal production of

passivity, which manifests itself as the individualized performance of undirected and at best self-referential virtuosity. By deliberately *not* behaving as a mere consumer or service provider in the new university factories (or edu-shopping malls), but rather as an impatient and irritated historical subject in the most different, unpredictable constellations, associations and organizational forms, we can turn social theory into an anti-hegemonic, anti-neoliberal praxis of the subjects of these institutions.

Translated by Nathaniel McBride

## Case study

# From fiasco to carnival

## The end of philosophy at Middlesex?

On 26 April, the Dean of the School of Arts and Education announced the decision to close recruitment to all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Philosophy at Middlesex University, London, including research degrees in the highly regarded Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) – the top research-rated unit in the University. News of the announcement quickly generated a widespread outpouring of concern and support. Within days an online petition demanding the reversal of the decision had already received several thousand signatures, whilst a ‘Save Middlesex Philosophy’ Facebook group set up by students had begun attracting members, garnering messages of solidarity from other departments and institutions – notably, in the UK, from similar campaigns at Sussex, Essex and King’s College London – and organizing campaign meetings. At the time of writing (9 June), the group has over 13,500 members and the petition has in excess of 18,000 signatures.

The press attention provoked by the closure began with an article by Nina Power published on 29 April in the CommentIsFree section of the *Guardian* online. This placed the recent events within the context of wider threats to Philosophy departments across the UK, but also took care to single out the particular intellectual and political concerns at stake in terminating Philosophy at Middlesex, with its critical emphasis upon European philosophy and political thought and its place within a post-92 university. The same day the

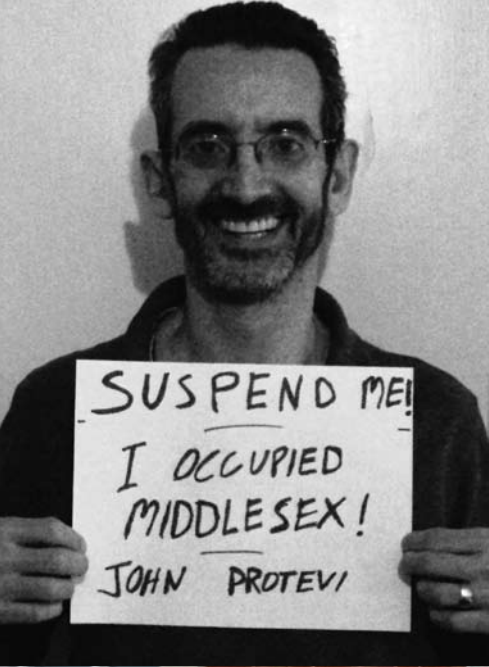
*New Statesman*’s ‘Cultural Capital’ website attacked the decision as a more general ‘Assault on the Humanities’ which lacked any ostensible rationale or justification. The *Times Higher Education* website picked up the story on 1 May, and followed up five days later in its weekly edition with a more detailed analysis of the underlying relationship of the announced closure to the strategic promotion of business, scientific and vocational subjects – at the expense of the humanities – by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)’s funding banding system. It also published a letter – signed by thirty leading international academics, including Badiou, Balibar, Butler, Hardt, Negri, Rancière, Spivak and Žižek – calling on the University to ‘reverse this damaging and ill-judged decision’ and ‘to renew its commitment to widening participation in education and to excellence in research’.

By this point, students had grown impatient with the University management’s refusal to justify their decision or to address these concerns. On 4 May, when the only meeting the management had called with them to discuss the implications for their ongoing study was cancelled at short notice, students protested by converging outside the office of the Dean of Arts and Education, who had recommended the closure, and electing to wait for him there. The wait lasted two days. At which point a rally was held outside the building, joined by supportive staff and students from other universities (including Étienne Balibar), and the sit-in expanded in terms of number of participants and

space, from the boardroom and administrative corridor to a full occupation of the main 'Mansion' building on the University's Trent Park campus. When, on 6 May, the deferred meeting ended with the management's refusal to enter into any negotiations concerning the reversal of their decision, students returned to the occupied building and declared it an open space for workshops, reading groups, presentations, poetry and film screenings. Over the following ten days a busy schedule of events was attended by researchers, teachers, students, artists and others sympathetic to the students' cause. This culminated in a rally outside the

occupied 'Mansion' at which Tariq Ali, an editor of *New Left Review*, spoke of the need to resist what he called 'Kentucky Fried Education': 'you swallow it, barely digest it, then excrete it'. The last students left the occupation on 15 May under the threat of a High Court injunction that the management had served the previous day. During this period their action had generated a number of articles in the British press, including further comments in the *Guardian* and *THE*, as well as the *Observer* and *London Review of Books* and a brief discussion on the BBC World Service's Sunday News Hour.







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### International academics protest at Middlesex philosophy closure

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### Rally over Middlesex University protesters' suspension

About 200 students and staff from Middlesex University have staged a protest and sit-in against the closure of the philosophy department.

The rally was in support of those students and staff who suspended for taking part in previous protests.

Protesters, including an academic, gathered on the steps of the building outside the lecture hall.

The university says an investigation of the students' actions will continue.

FOR LONDON STUDENTS

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- 2. Monitor: Always be aware of what's going on
- 3. Always through to a clear contact

5 News Alerts



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## FOR CRIMES AGAINST FREE THINKING AND ACADEMIA

These people have already succeeded in closing down a history department, which specialized in black history and escaped without justice being served. Now they are trying to close down their Arts and Philosophy. If we do not catch them for this academic theft they will strike again, suddenly and without warning. You could be next. **DANGER!** They are armed with money, connectivity and a well-oiled machine towards education, and have proved themselves incapable of being imprisoned with.

We have searched far and wide for these people, but so far we have not managed to get a confession, well justified and unambiguous statement for their crimes. If you see these people, please approach them and demand their justification of the destruction of these departments. When they fail to justify their actions, we encourage you to request that they run themselves in.

**You have freedom to believe that they can be reached at these email addresses:**  
M.Hesse@middlesex.ac.uk   M.Briscoll@middlesex.ac.uk   E.Esche@middlesex.ac.uk  
Please go to the web to see more information.

If you have any information which might be relevant, in question you need not present your name to the authorities at [info@middlesex.ac.uk](mailto:info@middlesex.ac.uk)

**SAVE MIDDLESEX PHILOSOPHY!**



## A perfect storm

Even more significant, perhaps, and indicative of the way in which contemporary political organization has sought to exploit the immediacy and mass reach of the Internet and social-networking sites as effectively and creatively as the corporations and institutions they are often poised against, is the way in which the campaign took root and proliferated online. Countless online journals and blogs sought to dissect and diagnose the events and their underlying causes, typically with more critical acumen and insight than the press itself: most notably, the comments appearing on the influential Leiter Reports blog and John Protevi's article on 'Why Middlesex Matters' for the US-based website 'Inside High-Ed'. Meanwhile, the campaign's Facebook group has provided a virtual space in which solidarity and encouragement could be publicly passed on to the occupying students in the form of messages of support and assembled videos and artworks, whilst organization and collaborative action could be collectively discussed and delegated.

This intensifying loop of real-world protests, social networking and blogging, and predominantly online journalism with its 'reader's comments', has nonetheless been triggered by what John Protevi has described as a "perfect storm" of academic resistance'. In many ways, however, it is the University management's own ambiguity concerning the rationale for the closure that has allowed this storm to grow. The Dean initially explained the decision as 'simply financial', emphasizing the low recruitment to the single-honours undergraduate programme. However, this explanation contradicted the strategy, previously endorsed by managers, to concentrate recruitment on postgraduate programmes and research degrees. The postgraduate community had flourished, with 48 MA students in 2009–10 (the largest cohort of Philosophy MA students in the UK) and 15 PhD students (with 5 PhDs awarded last year). The financial viability of the combined programmes had been strengthened by significant annual Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) income and external research funding, including a recent large AHRC project grant, 2006–09. Consequently, staff had been confident their subject group could meet the required contributions demanded by the University. One of the ironies of the situation turned out to be that it was the CRMEP's success in generating RAE income that had made it prey to the short-term 'asset-stripping' of its financial resources, which will be collected by the university from HEFCE until the end of the funding cycle (2014, at the earliest)

in the absence of the very researchers who generated the funding.

As many commentators have pointed out, notably in the *THE*, the 'financial' imperative behind this decision is closely tied to a prematurely enacted anticipation of changes in the HEFCE's funding streaming, an important source of revenue per student. HEFCE provides different levels of funding per student depending on the subject band, providing the most to what it perceives as more expensive training-based courses (the highest band being clinical medicine), and the least to classroom-based subjects such as those in the humanities. This difference is intended to reflect the higher level of spending necessitated by the course of study, yet many commentators have understood the closure of Philosophy at Middlesex as part of a wider strategy to generate additional income by switching from humanities to more vocational, training-based subjects without matching the increased spending expected of such degrees. This is taken by many as a symptom of



a disturbing trend in the funding and management of universities, which takes place against the backdrop of an imminent Tory–Liberal emergency budget seeking to make £200 million in spending cuts to university budgets and provide 10,000 fewer university places than announced in Labour's last budget. Such measures can only bolster the threats being made by the elite Russell group of universities to the government that if the cap on tuition fees is not removed they should expect a wave of privatizations by the prestigious universities, which threatens in turn regressively to transform the study of the humanities once more into the preserve of the privileged few.

## Capitalistic dread

What is most telling about the decision to close the philosophy programmes at Middlesex is the Dean's claim that the department's reputation made no 'measurable' contribution to the university; indeed, that reputation has 'no financial value'.

During 'Who's Afraid of Philosophy?', an event hosted on 19 May by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in support of the campaign, Peter Osborne, Director of the CRMEP, spoke of Middlesex as the 'current focal point for an intensifying attempt to get rid of philosophy, in particular, and to reduce the humanities in general' across a whole segment of UK universities. There is an existential dimension to this phenomenon, he argued, whereby philosophy has become the 'temporary resting place of a capitalistic dread' of the unmeasurable. This anxiety is held at bay by the precisely quantified commercial outgoings of the managers who are closing down Philosophy departments upon branding exercises, marketing and consultancy fees, and the swelling of their own bureaucratic regimes. At Middlesex, £3.5 million was spent on consultants and external advisers in 2008–09 alone. And whilst the number of academic staff has been falling, that of 'administrative' staff (which includes managers) has been increasing – the ratio is now 733:860 – and senior managerial staff earning in excess of £100,000 a year have almost doubled.

## Spasm of managerial self-destruction

Yet the management of the closure has been a fiasco – a corporate slasher movie remade in the style of an Ealing comedy. The hapless Dean, in particular (now known internationally for the 42-second clip of his promo performance to camera about Work-based Learning, circulating on the web), has lost all credibility among academic staff. Recent attempts to silence the sonorous contempt for his regime, by disciplining staff in the School for sending emails pointing out misinformation contained in management pronouncements, served only to strengthen staff resolve to build on the campaign to save the Philosophy programme, and to address broader issues of managerial practice, such as lack of consultation and the intimidation and bullying of staff.

On Thursday 20 May, students and staff, including those from a number of other endangered programmes in the humanities, staged a second sit-in, this time over a single night, in the university library. In the following days, three CRMEP staff and four students on

the Philosophy programmes were suspended pending investigation of their roles in the occupations. The staff suspensions barred them from entering University premises 'without the prior permission of the Dean or a member of the University Executive' and from 'contacting in any way any University employee or student', while nonetheless, confusingly, insisting they were 'expected to carry out all reasonable duties specified by the University' in relation to the delivery of their roles. This new 'spasm of managerial self-destruction', as Osborne described it to the *Evening Standard*, finally jolted the local UCU branch into action. And at an Emergency General Meeting on 28 May – which the suspended staff were explicitly denied permission to attend – a motion was passed giving the University until noon on 2 June to lift the suspensions, or the union would enter into a dispute – which it duly did.

Meanwhile, however, events took an unexpected turn. The following day, 3 June, Osborne announced to a meeting of students and staff that four members of the Research Centre – himself, Peter Hallward, Éric Alliez and Stella Sandford – had been offered the opportunity to move to Kingston University, in south-west London, along with all continuing postgraduate students, to re-establish the CRMEP there. In the face of the intensifying intransigence of Middlesex management, they had decided to accept the offer. A formal announcement setting out the situation appeared on the campaign website ([www.savemdxphil.com](http://www.savemdxphil.com)) on 8 June; and the two universities have confirmed they are in discussion over details of the transition, although the three staff remain suspended.

## Escape to Kingston

The move has been hailed as a significant, if partial, victory for the campaign. The core of the Centre will be held together, and its distinctive postgraduate programmes preserved. It is moving to a far more hospitable environment. However, the transfer will leave the undergraduates and the two remaining staff adrift at Middlesex, with the future of philosophy teaching there uncertain, beyond the teaching out of the final two years of the BA programmes. The campaign to reopen undergraduate recruitment to philosophy at Middlesex will thus go on, as part of a growing movement against the ongoing cuts in higher education.

The CRMEP has been saved, but the struggle being waged over the future of universities, in the UK and elsewhere, has only just begun.



# Occupation

No-one expected news of the closure of the Philosophy programmes at Middlesex to be met with resignation, but neither could anyone have predicted the resistance that followed. A group of people, many of whom had only previously stood together to queue for the printer, suddenly found themselves living – and fighting – side by side.

After management failed to turn up to discuss the closure with the students, we took the meeting to them. At the doors of the School management area, we were greeted by security guards. En masse we entered, securing access to the boardroom and adjoining corridor. But management was far away in another campus. The closest we got to them was the president of the Middlesex Student Union, who told us she did not support our occupation – so we asked her to leave. Security called the police, but after deciding that nothing illegal was taking place, they also left.

Determined to stay the night, we organized a rally for the next day to coincide with a London lecturers' strike. Realizing we need not stop there, we used the rally as cover for the expansion of the occupation to the whole building: we secured the mansion stairwells while people outside rushed into the ground floor through the windows. Overwhelmed by numbers, security had no choice but to leave. Now free of

management, police, the 'student union' and security guards, the space was ours.

We agreed that the space would remain ours until management reversed their decision. Even though this was a defensive demand to return to the recent past, we began to feel a different future – a sense that we could never quite go back to the same. Undergraduates and postgraduates became equals, working collaboratively in meetings; campus staff and local activists brought us food and messages of support; students from other universities shared stories and strategies; a panelled room was used for evening takeaways; the boardroom TV showed films into the night; students and visiting academics held seminars on topics from Marx to mathematics, from the architecture of occupation to international politics; and the out-of-bounds roof became a place to hang banners and hang out. Colleagues became comrades, offices became bedrooms, windows became doors and tables became barricades.

Unfortunately, we had not quite reached the stage at which management's High Court injunction had become just a bit of paper. Twelve days into the occupation, the last people left eight hours after the injunction came into effect.

But this was not the end: we occupied the campus library for a night, after which the university suspended



five students and half the Philosophy staff, only increasing our determination to fight on. We responded by establishing a camp for displaced students and academics on the front lawn of the main campus, and staging a protest at a Middlesex event in Central London.

Our struggle continues as we resist another wave of spurious suspensions and stand against the cuts at large. For we have not only established alliances within Middlesex, but with groups in other universities and workplaces across the country, allowing us to put the cuts to education at Middlesex, and our fight against

them, into a national context. In solidarity, we have joined forces with others who are fighting cuts, such as the BA cabin crew, Right to Work, UCU, Greek Workers, and Stop the Cuts campaigns. We hope and believe that as these cuts expand, similar resistance will spread across the country, and the links we have established with groups from Essex, Westminster and Sussex universities, Goldsmiths, SOAS, King's and others will widen and deepen. We look forward to many more late-night dinners in occupied buildings in the years to come.

**The Middlesex Occupiers**

## Westminster, Sussex, King's...

On 5 May, thousands of lecturers went out on strike across London, including staff from King's College London, Westminster and Sussex universities, and eleven further education colleges, including CONEL and Hackney, supported by many of the students they taught.

Earlier in March, students from the University of Westminster had stormed a meeting of the board of governors and occupied the vice chancellor's office to protest against planned cuts and job losses. Lecturers at Sussex University had, also in March, voted in favour of strike action in response to the announcement of the closure of the Modern Languages faculty, drastic cuts to the English and History departments, and the planned loss of 112 jobs. In support of this decision, Sussex students staged a sit-in inside the university's main administrative centre, a situation that escalated when members of administrative staff locked themselves inside an office and riot police were called. The university secured a High Court injunction against the occupying students and two days later suspended six of the students involved in the sit-in. This in turn provoked a week-long occupation of a lecture hall by a much larger number of students, which coincided with one-day strike action by staff, and the eventual reinstatement of the suspended students pending disciplinary hearings.

In April, lecturers at King's College London went on strike against massive cuts, £1.52 million of which were to be made in the School of Arts and Humanities. Academics there feared that the managerial vision of

'financially viable academic activity' indicated a significant threat to their subjects, which may be sidelined in favour of HEFCE's higher funded, training-based subjects. An open letter signed by 2,700 students and friends of the Philosophy Department at King's College London objected to the 'restructuring' of the School of Arts and Humanities, on the grounds that it would result in job losses for a number of valued academics, and would require all faculty members to compete against each other in reapplications for their own posts. It rejected the lack of transparency in the consultation process and the absence of any proposed alternatives.

In May the hearings for the suspended Sussex students were held against the backdrop of national student protest, a motion of support by the University and College Union (UCU) and an open letter condemning the university management's actions signed by academics, union leaders and the first elected Green MP, Caroline Lucas. Only the minor charge of 'conduct injurious to the academic or administrative activities of the university' was upheld, whilst all the more serious allegations relating to violent and threatening behaviour were dropped. Staff and students have vowed to continue their protest against the cuts, with further strikes being mooted.

Meanwhile, staff and students working in Arts and Humanities at King's have claimed an important victory in the wake of the protests: when the final consultation document was published on 18 May, it transpired that cost savings could be made in the school without any forced redundancies.

**MC**