Academics ree from arts cuts at UK universities

GEORGIA LUCKMURST

Drama and arts lecturers at universities across England have warned of “a world without Shakespeare, Pinter and Beckett” because of sweeping cuts to theatre departments across the country.

They claim the cuts to creative subjects threaten to teach young people that the arts are dispensable.

It comes as universities including Surrey, Kent, Middlesex, Goldsmiths and Queen Mary University of London undergo restructuring — with entire departments and courses at risk of being cut.

Changes to Middlesex University’s theatre division could result in its master’s degree in Theatre Arts being cancelled, while 13 members of its staff face redundancy.

A senior lecturer in theatre at the university said: “We in theatre are the canary in the mine. We are the first ones to go.”

A spokesperson from Middlesex University confirmed it was making “difficult and responsible decisions” to ensure its longevity, amid “complex financial challenges” including the ongoing freeze on tuition fees, rising costs and barriers to international recruitment, and a downward trend in interest for certain degrees.

Plans to cut some 150 jobs at Goldsmiths, University of London are also set to reduce arts staff, with the proposals mainly directed within the departments that include theatre and performance, English and creative writing, and music.

Frances Corner, warden of Goldsmiths, said that it was, like other universities, “having to make difficult decisions” as it navigated a “finding model that is widely acknowledged to be unfit for purpose”.

She attributed the restructuring to a failure to prioritise the arts at an earlier age for students, and said: “Fewer students are choosing these subjects at university.”

“We are fully committed to retaining the arts, humanities and social sciences as core elements of our educational offer.”

Staff at the University of Kent are also officially at risk, with a proposed 31 job cuts to take place across subjects largely within the humanities.

In a bulletin released by the university on March 21, entire departments were confirmed to be being “phased out”.

An arts academic within the university said: “The University of Kent clearly does not see the arts as core to its portfolio.”

They continued: “We know that music has been severely cut back at secondary and primary school level. Such short-sighted decisions set a dangerous precedent.”

But a University of Kent spokesperson stressed that changes reflected “anticipated student demand in the future” and “a very challenging environment for the sector”.

They emphasised the continued work of the university’s Institute for Cultural and Creative Industries and said: “This is supported by a thriving extracurricular music and arts programme that will always be a key part of what we offer.”

The spokesperson also expressed hope that “any staff reduction can be supported by voluntary means”, without the need for compulsary redundancies.

A voluntary redundancy scheme is also under way at the University of Surrey.

A spokesperson said: “The UK’s higher education sector is navigating significant financial pressures. These include rising inflation, escalating energy costs, the sustained devaluation of tuition fees, and a decline in international student numbers.”

Marion Wynne-Davies, an academic at the University of Surrey, said she feared the “incredible talent being nurtured” today could be lost as higher-education providers cut arts and humanities provision “in order to save money.”

Wynne-Davies told The Stage: “Our society needs more than monetary maintenance and that’s why educating young people in the arts matters. Would we really want a world without Shakespeare, Pinter and Beckett?”

She added: “Politicians continually privilege the sciences, even though the arts contribute more than £4 billion a year to the British economy.”

Queen Mary University of London has also encouraged staff in its English and drama department to take redundancy, in a move a spokesperson said would “align with the demands of future students and deliver leading research to address the ever-changing challenges facing society”.

Jasvinder Blackwell-Pal, a lecturer at QMUL, said the impact of cuts was particularly concerning for those who may otherwise face barriers to engaging with the arts.

She added that the “national” crisis for higher education required a “coordinated” response and encouraged staff to “work collectively” and join their relevant unions.

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