Course closures bring risk of ‘humanities cold spots’

Development of ‘cold spots’ without arts and humanities programmes prompts calls for more strategic approach to university provision

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Disappearing courses across the UK are fast becoming an urgent access issue as rising numbers of stay-at-home students find their choices constricted at their local university, it has been warned.

Many British institutions have been slimming down their programme offerings in an era of restricted finances while cost-of-living pressures in recent years have exacerbated an already growing trend for students to commute from their family home (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/more-applicants-consider-living-home-cost-living-bites) to study, particularly among lower socio-economic groups.

These factors have combined to create a “new geography of provision and equality”, according to Graeme Atherton, the director of the National Education Opportunities Network, whose recent report highlighted growing regional disparities in widening participation (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/poorest-pupils-face-access-postcode-lottery-progress-stalls).

“The issue of what kind of provision is available in what places is one that really needs to come to the fore more,” he said. “It is concerning we are not having that discussion.”

have also highlighted the potential widespread geographical impact of its cutting its single-honour language degrees (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/aberdeen-set-close-language-degrees-recruitment-nosedives), given its location in north-east Scotland.

Professor Atherton said course closures at universities with large local intakes would likely have a proportionately high impact on participation rates, with students unable to study a subject locally faced with a choice between a longer, more expensive commute or not going to university at all.

Emma Griffin, professor of modern British history at Queen Mary University of London (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/queen-mary-university-london) and president of the Royal Historical Society, said there was a risk of subjects such as hers being denied to students from disadvantaged backgrounds because provision was “being lost or really diminished in certain institutions” and students who would have studied in these departments “don’t have the mobility or often the grades” to go elsewhere.

In a study published last year in The Language Learning Journal (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09571736.2023.2257705?src=exp-la), Becky Muradás-Taylor, professor of languages and linguistics at the University of Leeds (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-leeds), identified that course closures were leading to the development of large “cold spots” for language tuition in the north, the east and the south-west of England when focusing on lower-entry tariff – and therefore more accessible – institutions.

Her paper points out that in 2019 the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages recommended more “strategic oversight...to ensure changes in provision are implemented with due consideration on regional and national impact”, but she said a mechanism that dictated which courses universities must keep running was “not where we are at as a sector”.

Instead, she said, it was important to ensure that bodies such as the University Council for Languages (UCFL) – where Professor Muradás-Taylor chairs the Widening Participation Languages Network – maintained strategic oversight of the situation to advise the government to direct funding towards the programmes that might be suffering the most.

Professor Atherton said there might be a case for regulators to look at the issue, but only if there was accompanying support for universities that argue that they are having to close courses because they are not viable economically.

Emma Cayley, chair of UCFL and co-chair of the Arts and Humanities Alliance, said some universities were already thinking about how they might work together in consortia to ensure that at-risk subjects continue to be offered, potentially utilising some online provision.

While this should be “approached with caution” to make sure that it did not exacerbate closures, she said it could be one “way to deal with some of the issues in the areas where there is no provision, or it has been reduced”.

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