



SHU UCU Report into the Human Impact of the University's 'Death Spiral'

“Accountants, as people whose business it chiefly is to bring hard news to powerful people, generally avoid emotional terms. They prefer softer, nuanced and obscure technical terms, instead. These allow them to say what needs to be said and then leave the meeting before the explosive reaction. So, when they use a term like “death spiral”, you may take it as read that they are not messing about. But what is a cost allocation death spiral, and why does it matter so much to universities at the moment? It’s about management not understanding the limits of their own accounting systems and so destroying their own organisations.” (Mills, 2024)ⁱ

This report is currently a collation of anonymised quotes from our membership, which we put a call out for on 27th March 2026. As more quotes come in, we will be updating the document. In due course, this raw empirical data will be systematically analysed and written up for publication.

This report is open access for the membership, the University Executive Board, MPs, the media, and the general public.

Last updated 29th March 2026

ⁱ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/cost-allocation-death-spiral-university-jonathan-mills-k5ltf>

Anonymised quotes from our membership

“I'm not someone who disengages easily, but I'm making shorter-term decisions than I was three months ago. I'm not planning the way I used to. That's new to me, and I don't think I'm alone in it. What you're attempting to do (a pension I didn't agree to, employment through a subsidiary company I had no say in) signal something beyond the financial. They signal that the terms of a career I built here in good faith are no longer what I thought they were. That's something that changes my relationship with the place, and this is not something I just 'adjust to'. What's hard to explain to people who haven't experienced it is that the demoralisation doesn't show up in missed deadlines or formal complaints. It shows up in the things that were never required, the extra conversation after a seminar, the visiting practitioner I made possible because I still have one foot in that world, the energy I bring because I genuinely want to. You can't mandate that. You can't measure it. And once it goes, it goes quietly. The deepest irony is this: the people most affected by these proposals are the same people whose primary job is to motivate the next generation. You don't get to extract that from someone you've just demoralised. That's not how human beings work, and no financial reset changes that.”

“I want to write something but it's hard to even put it into words. I've been at Hallam for 20 years but the last few have been utterly soul destroying, and this last week has almost been too much to take. People keep asking how I'm doing, and all I can do is shrug. I haven't slept properly all week, am utterly exhausted, and yet still turned up for 6 hours of teaching and two hours of supervision meetings today with a smile on my face because I actually still care about our students and their experience. This job is something I'm really bloody good at and to be given the choice of taking VSS now or waiting to maybe or maybe not be judged later, on some mythical criteria in a “desk-based exercise” is just utterly reprehensible. The fact that our glorious leaders can't (or won't) see the cruelty and/or complete incompetence of the situation THAT THEY HAVE CREATED is maddening. Announcing this just before the Easter break is also awful. This has all left me feeling extremely vulnerable, anxious, and fearful for my and my family's future, and if I hear one more time that the people making these decisions “really do care” and “understand how hard this must be” I think I'll lose my fucking shit.”

“When the latest proposals were announced I sat at my computer screen with tears running down my face. I work so hard, and as a single parent of a disabled child I am in no position to relocate or commute to find other work. I already knew I'd be working until at least state

pension age, but now I think it will have to be well into my 70s. They have cut us to the bone already. How much more do they think we can take?"

"Being told that a whole group of colleagues are, I quote, 'An Unsustainable group of people' made me feel sick. We've given everything to our students and this university. When short staffed, we've given even more, and not let the ball drop. Now, on paper, that looks like we are doing fine. Because that's what happens when you remove the humanity from our reality. What's unsustainable here is what we have been forced through. The unsustainable group of people are the ones at the top making these poor business choices and making us pay with our jobs."

"I feel frustrated and angered that myself and colleagues' futures have been compromised due to how highly paid professionals reacted to expenditure exceeding income for a good number of years by building a London campus that was not required and buildings that are unlikely to be ever fully utilised. I feel frustrated and angered that a £40M debt can creep up on professional managers /accountants and take them unawares, until the point where they perhaps jumped ship and moved to pastures new. I feel frustrated and angered that my future is being decided by the highest paid departmental managers, who are only looking downward to make the university's life changing cuts where the savings proposed are so small, yet the impact is so large. It seems like they are putting the deckchairs out on the deck of the Titanic. I feel frustrated and angered that I am being made to feel like this!"

"I am feeling really anxious about the proposed job cuts, will I still be here teaching my students next year? I have a young family so I am really scared of losing my job or my job being downgraded and not being able to afford my mortgage or nursery bills. I love both sides of my role - teaching and research - that's my absolute passion, and I am really disheartened to see the work that we do as senior lecturers devalued by senior management, how can they take away my research hours?!"

"It feels like there is a big cloud hanging over SHU. It is very difficult to function 'as usual' under these circumstances."

"I am beyond stressed at the moment. On a fractional contract at SHU and going through an intensely difficult personal time I find it impossible now to concentrate, sleep, make ends meet or even understand what best to do. Frankly the thought of continuing to work for an institution that presents the near certainty of your job loss in front of everyone, with no prior warning, under the guise of 'consultation' and 'listening' appalls me. I'm just trying now to

weigh up the best approach to what I would do with VSS, with a mortgage and children in a shocking job market, vs the flimsy possibility that I might still have some kind of job, where I'm expected to contribute more for less, with no prospect of progression - even typing this, it doesn't feel like much of a choice. Most of all the prospect of not having to go through any more of this is the most tempting thing.”

“Colleagues with decades of service to Sheffield Hallam, people who have made immense personal sacrifices to remain at Hallam due to their passion for teaching and their genuine commitment towards shaping the careers of the younger generation using this noble profession as a base, are disgusted to see the devaluing of higher education currently taking place at SHU, purely for financial survival. We have seen this academic degradation and financial decline gradually setting in over the past ten years in the guise of ‘transformative change’, purely driven by the urge and greed for personal profile building, undermining, and devaluing the academic talent in abundance across the university. With meaningless structural changes, dismantling and challenging the time-tested principles of higher education in the UK, Sheffield Hallam has recently been one of the institutions at the forefront of this post-92 universities decline. Today we can clearly see how we have pushed most students away from the urge and passion for learning, with empty classrooms in the middle of glamorous buildings. Twenty years ago, Sheffield Hallam University was a recognised leader among post-92 institutions – innovative, ambitious, and academically respected on par with pre-92 university standards for quality of education delivered, together with excellent practices in teaching and learning. This is why, in 2005, the HEFCE awarded four (out of 74) Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning Projects (CETLs) to SHU. Over the last 10 years, we have seen every proven academic and administrative structure and mechanism being dismantled, and a rapid return towards the former polytechnic era. The FE sector has already seen this irreversible decline in academic standards. Now the post-92 universities are being pushed down the same path. Our struggle, therefore, is not simply about protecting our own roles or departments. It is about defending the integrity and quality of university education across the UK. What happens at Sheffield Hallam will shape what happens nationally. If we lose the battle here, we risk losing the principles that define a university at all.”

“I really struggled to put into words how this feels. I have two children, I am the main income for our house, and I’m at risk. I’ve not slept properly. I was already ill from the increased workload, I’ve worked when unwell due to fears of redundancy before they were even announced. I’m supposed to meet my dissertation students and smile and support them and in my head I’m thinking I might not be here to do this again. I worked so hard, I came from a

very underprivileged background and I've had to fight so hard to get to senior lecturer, it's taken years, it's taken grit, and to now be in this position is just absolutely heartbreaking. The lack of empathy from the UEB is astounding - instead of holding their little talks why don't they pop into a classroom, watch us juggle everything we do, maybe they could try a few weeks in our shoes then decide how disposable we are. I work so damn hard, I work evenings and weekends to get around the minimal time we get for marking and to write new materials. That comes from dedication and experience. We are people, not numbers."

"As I sat shell shocked on Wednesday at the news that 31 of us are facing redundancy, I tried to remind myself of why I decided to leave an established career in professional practice to enter the world of academia. How have things changed so dramatically since 2019 when I joined SHU full of optimism and energy at the opportunity to share my wealth of experience with students who wanted to learn from somebody who knew the realities of the profession they were interested in joining? How has the narrative changed from, 'we value your experience' to 'too many senior lecturers is a problem'? I left my previous profession after 20 years because of the dissonance I experienced on a daily basis - I could no longer practice in ways aligned to my value base. Well congratulations SHU, you've managed to achieve that in 7 short years. The persistent disregard for student experience (despite everything you preach) means that I now have less time than ever to talk to students, plan engaging teaching materials or engage meaningfully with their work. I have worked every weekend in 2026 trying to keep on top of teaching, marking and the performance needed to sustain the meagre amount of hours you give me for so-called 'significant responsibility for research'. And what may I ask did you do with the money generated through the last REF? Or with the money brought in through lucrative external teaching contracts for professional courses? That's right, 3 buildings we didn't need. One of which I sit in regularly freezing cold, struggling to find a toilet that is working in order, the students complain about because there are no power sockets but hey, there is an external company watering the plants regularly. So I cannot sleep for fear of losing my job and with it my identity. I cannot imagine how bad the job will be if I do not lose my job. And then this email appears from a student; 'you have pushed me to do the best I possibly can in this final semester and given me hope of completing my final year. The support I have received from you is amazing and I don't think I could have had a more supportive person by my side'. So SHU, are you going to include that in your desk-based exercise when considering my fate?"

"It has been eye-opening joining this institution, from a career in industry. There has been cryptic meeting after cryptic meeting, each with strained smiles from the managers we are forced to listen to. The tone of the meetings is truly dystopian, and the managers are

disingenuous. This is what everyone says after the meetings, including non-union members. There is not a single person I have met who has not joined the union because they don't think they're right. It's entirely about affordability, and their perception of unions' shrinking powers, in the wake of increasing disinterest at leadership levels in supporting students. Yet those leaders have the audacity during strikes to claim they are prioritising student interests. In the meantime, each staff member has prostrated themselves to maintain quality amidst the uncertainty around their futures. This is far more than the incompetent leaders and managers deserve, and unsustainable. Those managers' delusions that they are acting practically, based on financial need, are laid bare by well-established and well-documented scholarship fatally undermining the tools they use to reach their calculations. They are like children hosting a tea party with imagined tea. I would urge any staff member who has bought into their calculation methods to join the union and fight back. For each £ spent on university staff, there are inevitably ££s gained in prolonged savings to the public purse and immediate spending in local economies. It is not possible to reconcile this obvious fact with claims made by university financiers that course income can be calculated by department, using narrower metrics."

"The uncertainty of everything is hard to bear. I find myself feeling tearful, even in public, which is unlike me. I feel like I've been given an impossible choice: apply for VS, which may not even happen, with no idea if I will get another job if it does or wait to see if I will be made redundant, with not even 3 weeks' pay. Staying at SHU will see my job change seemingly beyond recognition, whilst picking up the work of my departed colleagues. While there will be fewer staff, there will not be less work, or fewer students to support. It has been very hard to concentrate over the last couple of weeks, making everything even more difficult to keep on top of, both personally and professionally. Watching the university crumble and feeling like the management don't care makes this even worse. We don't need "wellness" or "resilience" workshops. We need and deserve respect."

"Since the announcement I have lay awake two nights in a row, next to my disabled daughter, worrying about what these decisions mean for her future. The university is very happy to use inclusion as a marketing slogan but when it comes to their actions they just continue to embody a cruel and exclusionary system."

"Someone breaks up with you, once, twice... Now three times. How much longer can you fight for this relationship? There's no longer trust, big dreams, or effort. I would have never imagined losing motivation as this used to be the best profession. There is only so much time one can continue in survival mode; at some point, you need to move on. This makes

me even wonder if my work has any social impact anymore as the disengagement across our courses is brutal.”

“The sustained stress of this situation – which has been going on for over a year – is indescribable, especially as a widow so there is only my income to keep a roof over my head. The cliches and platitudes that management come out with, about understanding how we feel, always seems like kicking us when we’re down. On their fat salaries they haven’t got a clue!”

“After many years of dedicating my life to SHU and continually delivering outstanding international research and impact, the last years of cold and calculating indifference to the excellence me and my colleagues have delivered for so many years has been deeply disturbing and such a deep disappointment. We no longer have any faith in the university’s care for research.”

“My work as an academic at Hallam has been my vocation, my passion, and my pride for over 20 years. To have my career be put at risk for a doomed business venture at the other end of the country brings feelings of intense hurt and betrayal. To watch this being inflicted on my colleagues who have worked so hard to support our students brings a visceral pain. I feel we have all been sacrificed for a vanity project and that the students and the Hallam name will also suffer for years to come.”

“Absolutely devastated when the workforce has kept the university running despite unbearable and unsustainable workloads resulting from previous cuts. I thought I had a job I loved, at an institution I respected for the rest of my working life but am now actively seeking an alternate career path where my expertise, passion, drive for quality (and motivation to go above and beyond) isn’t abused and devalued and where I am not constantly pulled into an unfair and quite frankly cruel process of drip feeding significant information about the future of the university. I just can’t continue to work for an organisation with such a lack of regard for the well-being of its primary resource.”

“I can’t sleep and I’m sick with worry for me and my colleagues. I should be going into a nice holiday period, a break (finally!), with my family but instead I’m lying awake panicking about my immediate future and any potential of saving my academic career. The cruelty of making the pool for job losses so big when they clearly already know which areas they’re targeting, the cruelty of making people make life changing decisions without all the information they need to do so. The fear of leaving my PhD students without a supervisor after years of

seeing them through the most significant periods of their lives. I've got 30 years ahead of me before retirement, I have a young family and a mortgage, the pittance of a statutory redundancy payout looming over my family. I love Sheffield Hallam and the joy of my colleagues - my daily life is full of brilliant friends and students. And now I'm watching them crying in corridors. I shouldn't be the one not sleeping, I don't know how any of the UEB or the Board of Governors sleep at night.”

“Well, I have had to book in counselling as panic attacks and low mood have started. I have also had to consider whether I will need to sell our family home if I lose my job. This is particularly difficult given our son is neuro diverse and is terrified of change. We also provide childcare for our great niece and nephew and take them away in the summer as their parents cannot afford to do this. We won't be able to do that this year. I have various medical conditions and as such am likely to have a shorter overall life expectancy than average. The proposed pension changes mean that my plan to be able to have a retirement may not happen now. I may literally work til I die. Despite being sleepless and having panic attacks, I dare not take time off to protect my health in case they use that against me to 'cull' me. I am an early career researcher who had planned further publications and also arranging a conference. This is pointless now. Have good days and stay safe.”

“I feel scared I might be forced out of my job. I feel sickened: To have your Head of Institute showboating about new departmental structures in a staff meeting one week, then announce a quarter of your immediate colleagues on your grade are being ditched the next, turns the stomach. I feel hollow.”

“It has been days of uncertainty... weeks of uncertainty and years of uncertainty. As an academic at this institution, I am exhausted by the workload and the constantly shifting sands at SHU. I was a student here before I was an academic, this place does not feel the same. Students feel the cuts, staff feel the cuts and everyone suffers. The UEB talk about needing balance at grade 8, but instead of strengthening the staff working at this and lower levels, they introduce a new raft of cuts, protecting those in leadership roles and providing greater uncertainty. No suggestion that anything will change or that anyone can outline long term strategic vision. How can we transform lives when we cannot transform the catastrophic mess in the vacuum of our strategic vision? It is time to reimagine how we want our university to be, remember what a university is and who it serves. Learn and serve SHU as our motto suggests, it's not too late.”

“I have just had broken sleep ever since this was announced and it’s caused by stress at the thought of losing my job and feeling compelled to take VS because they won’t say where the student recruitment gaps are by course. I am mid-fifties with two kids at uni, a mortgage and all of a sudden job insecurity. The stress is unbearable and intolerable. In having nursed him through end of life since Sep, all the while teaching and marking, in Jan my dad died and my world just fell apart. In February, I stumbled back to work ... These (what was the word the ShAC students used?) just pulled the floor from underneath me again. They ride roughshod over our hearts. Heartless hollow Executive led by an accountant enabled by a corporate pig farmer from Tesco. Love and solidarity to all UCU reps and members.”

“I think the quote from the students about replacing the old and decadent with the new and streamlined – never have I felt such a direct attack on age and experience...what are we leaving behind to future generations- when you get old they will replace you with the new - what incentive is that to gain further qualifications. When did we lose what education and learning was for.”

“Joining Hallam from a career as a practitioner in the public sector I was excited. An opportunity to work for a university that valued applied knowledge, the privilege of teaching, influencing and supporting the ‘next generation’ of public sector practitioners in South Yorkshire and beyond. Better still, I could contribute to the improvement of practice through knowledge exchange and research that sought to explore, understand and influence the ‘real world’ landscape this future generation of practitioners and the communities they serve, are engaged with. But in the space of just a few years, I have been forced to take extensive strike action in order to demonstrate my unwillingness to tolerate Hallam’s behaviour towards its staff across academia and professional services and ultimately, its students. Worse still, the issues are fed to us as ‘sector wide’ and yes there are challenges, but the severity of the situation at Hallam’s is wholly as a result of years of mismanagement at the highest levels, problems of their own making. The impact of this is being felt heavily across Hallam, an institution I was once so proud to join has lost respect and reputation not only locally, but on a national scale. The financial disadvantage I have personally experienced is significant as a part-time working mother, the discriminatory nature of the proposed changes disproportionately impact on the ability of early-mid career individuals to build the career we now can only dream of. This discrimination feels heavier still as a person working a fractional contract in order to raise young children. The proposed changes to my employer, to my career aspirations, to how I engage with students and research, and of course the fact I may be without a job altogether come July, judged by an anonymous panel with an unknown agenda leaves me feeling burnt out and unable to deliver ‘business as usual’ despite this

being the message we receive from 'leadership'. It's difficult to see how any of this is possible when we are preoccupied with whether we will make it to the next academic year with a job or not..."

"The worry is really about the students isn't it. The management is creating very demoralised unhappy academics. We do the best to teach but we are still human. We are in an organisation that is doing its best to get rid of the staff who have the best experience and knowledge to educate. Aren't we the best for the University if it still wants to be a university and not a college. When mummy and daddy fight it is the children who gets hurt!"

"[The inhumanity] is an understatement for such a strategically underhand, uncompassionate, unprofessional and cruel approach taken by the university. They have intentionally planned to overshadow major changes with a systematically planned attack on work, pay, reputation, and our personal lives. There is additionally the professional impact of those unable to return to practice as health professionals, due to lack of available roles now put in an additionally vulnerable position of possibly losing their registration PIN numbers, which will further impact on socioeconomic and psychological factors, further worsening the mental health risks of a committed and experienced workforce. Inhumane??? I feel this is not fully descriptive of what has been laid at our already tired, overworked and taken for granted feet!"

"Here's a wee 'humaniser'... A two-character play titled 'Sign me off!'

GP: Your symptoms suggest you're dealing with a lot of stress. How are things at work?

Me: Uh... ask me one on sport.

Living with a chronic illness is hard enough, but right now it feels like there's no relief or rest."

"Redundancies, whether voluntary or not, aren't just a number on a balance sheet. It's people navigating uncertainty, families adjusting to change, mortgages that may remain unpaid, lost homes for children and young people. It is immoral to forget that behind every lost job is a human story that deserves dignity. Respect the people and stop cutting jobs!"

"Due to ongoing job insecurity and continual structural changes, we are increasingly unable to deliver the quality of work we strive for. The institution has become an unstable environment with limited opportunities for growth. More importantly, we are concerned about the standard of education we are able to offer students under these conditions. As things stand, I would not feel confident recommending Hallam as a place of study to family and friends."

“These past weeks have left us feeling shaken and undervalued, carrying the emotional weight of uncertainty while still trying to support our students and one another. We urgently need our leaders to pause, listen, and meaningfully engage with the people whose lives and wellbeing are being affected by unsupported and unproved decisions—decisions that risk dismantling the very foundations of the community, expertise, and care that make this university what it is.”