Future Nottingham Phase 2: report and recommendations

Submitted by the University and College Union (UCU)

Guide to this document

This document is split into five distinct sections each of which could be read as standalone documents in their own right.

The first of these presents an alternative high level proposal for cost savings and institutional restructuring. This carries far less risk than the proposals being put forward by the University Executive Board (UEB), while securing a sustainable and prosperous future for the University. The next three sections dig more deeply into some of the risks associated with UEB's plan, respectively focussing on Student-Staff ratios (building on our December report), Research Excellence and the impact of drastic cuts on the local community. We end with a section on University Governance, highlighting how and why bad decisions have been and continue to be made at our University.

Before making any decision, we implore council members, especially external members, to properly scrutinize the risks associated with UEB's proposals, while demanding to know the extent to which cuts allow the University to continue to deliver on its core services on a school by school level. We believe that they do not and that this is a view shared by school level managers across the university, and of course, rank and file staff. In contrast, our proposal offers a much more sustainable future for the University.

Executive Summary

This report sets out a clear choice facing Council: not between action and inaction, but between two fundamentally different approaches to financial sustainability. The University Executive Board (UEB) proposes a rapid, large-scale restructuring to deliver a high operating surplus through accelerated staff reductions, programme closures, and significant increases in student–staff ratios (SSR). This is presented as a prudent strategy to reduce long-term risk and create financial headroom for future investment.

However, the evidence presented in this report demonstrates that the means of achieving this surplus introduce risks that are both immediate and systemic. Rather than mitigating future uncertainty, the current strategy risks triggering a cycle of declining recruitment, reduced research income, reputational damage, and further restructuring. In short, the pursuit of a high surplus through rapid contraction may itself become the primary source of institutional risk.

By contrast, this report sets out a credible alternative that achieves meaningful financial savings while protecting the University's core income-generating activities. This alternative is built on controlled workforce adjustment combined with structural reform that strengthens academic delivery and restores effective governance. It represents a lower-risk pathway to financial sustainability, preserving flexibility while avoiding the destabilising effects of large-scale compulsory redundancies.

The Risk–Reward Imbalance in the Current Strategy

UEB's strategy is based on a clear premise: that a higher operating surplus reduces institutional risk. In principle, this is sound. However, the scale and speed of the proposed changes fundamentally alter the risk profile.

The projected savings are heavily dependent on increasing SSRs to between 18 and 22 and significantly reducing academic staffing. This assumes that the University can shrink core capacity while simultaneously sustaining student recruitment and research income. The evidence in this report indicates that this assumption is highly uncertain.

Recruitment and income risk. Rising SSRs directly affect teaching quality, student experience, and league table performance. Modelling shows that increases in SSR are likely to reduce student demand, particularly among international applicants, with losses compounding across multiple cohorts. These effects directly undermine the financial recovery the strategy seeks to achieve.

Research income and reputation risk. Reductions in staff and protected research time weaken the research environment that underpins grant capture, output, and REF performance. These impacts emerge over a 3–10 year horizon but are difficult to reverse once established, with likely consequences for rankings, funding, and institutional reputation. Postgraduate students are already expressing concerns about how much time their advisors will have to support their research.

Risk of uncontrolled staff loss. The strategy assumes a controlled reduction in staffing. In practice, the signal of large-scale redundancies risks accelerating voluntary departures, particularly among high-performing staff who are most able to secure alternative employment. This creates a material risk that capacity is lost in precisely the areas the University seeks to protect.

Organisational and cultural risk. Evidence suggests that the scale of proposed cuts is already encouraging defensive behaviours within Schools, reducing collaboration and weakening the conditions for high-quality teaching and research. Declining morale and trust further increase operational risk.

Industrial relations risk. The University should also be aware that UCU has entered a formal dispute and is balloting for industrial action. Membership has grown significantly during this period, reflecting increasing staff concern. While the union has consistently expressed a desire to minimise disruption to students, it has also made clear that it will take action to defend jobs and the long-term future of the institution. This introduces a further layer of risk—both reputational and operational—that has not been factored into the current strategy.

Taken together, these factors create a risk of a negative feedback loop in which cost reductions drive revenue loss, leading to further cuts and institutional instability. The strategy relies on achieving savings through mechanisms that simultaneously weaken the University's income base.

A Lower-Risk Alternative

This report proposes an alternative approach that achieves substantial financial savings while avoiding the destabilising effects of rapid contraction.

Controlled savings through attrition. The University's natural staff turnover can be used to deliver significant savings over a 3–5 year period by managing replacement rates and workforce composition. This approach reduces costs without redundancy payments, without damaging morale, and without undermining recruitment or research capacity.

Avoidance of disruption and additional costs. Large-scale redundancies introduce immediate financial costs as well as indirect risks through disruption, legal exposure, and potential escalation in severance arrangements. A phased approach avoids these costs and reduces financial uncertainty.

Protecting revenue-generating capacity. The alternative focuses on maintaining the core drivers of income: teaching quality, student demand, research activity, and reputation. Rather than shrinking the institution and attempting to rebuild, it preserves the conditions necessary for sustainable recovery.

Structural reform for long-term sustainability. The proposal includes a shift toward a more devolved and academically led operating model, with clearer alignment between decision-making, delivery, and income generation. This addresses underlying structural weaknesses without relying on rapid contraction.

Preserving flexibility. A gradual approach allows the University to respond to changes in the external environment, including sector instability, policy shifts, and competitor behaviour. It avoids locking the institution into a high-risk trajectory based on uncertain assumptions.

Governance and Credibility

The report also identifies concerns regarding governance and decision-making processes. Evidence suggests that established procedures have not been consistently followed, and that there are inconsistencies between stated methodologies and actual implementation, particularly in relation to SSR.

These issues have potential financial implications. Failure to follow proper processes may expose the University to challenge, delay implementation, and increase costs. More broadly, they raise questions about the robustness of the analysis underpinning the current strategy.

Conclusion: A Strategic Choice

The University faces genuine financial pressures, and action is required. However, the central issue is not whether change is needed, but how it is delivered.

The current strategy seeks to reduce risk by building a high surplus. However, the means of achieving this—rapid reductions in academic capacity—introduce significant and potentially irreversible risks to recruitment, research income, and institutional reputation. There is a credible possibility that these risks undermine the strategy's own financial objectives.

The alternative set out in this report offers a different balance. It delivers meaningful savings while protecting the University's core strengths and income streams. It reduces immediate financial pressure without triggering the destabilising effects associated with large-scale redundancies and rapid structural change.

Council is therefore asked to consider not only the projected financial outcomes, but the risk profile of the pathways used to achieve them. The choice is not between risk and safety, but between a high-risk strategy dependent on optimistic assumptions, and a lower-risk approach that preserves the University's capacity to recover and grow.

An Alternative Proposal for Sustainability

Overview

The University's current restructuring strategy seeks to deliver between £36m and £67.5m in annual savings by 2029/30, primarily through accelerated staff reductions, programme closures, and rising student–staff ratios (SSR). While presented as a necessary correction, the strategy depends on a high-risk assumption: that rapid downsizing can occur simultaneously with academic growth and income expansion.

This report demonstrates that the proposed approach carries significant financial and operational risks. Increasing SSRs are likely to weaken league table performance and reduce student recruitment, with modelling indicating potential tuition income losses exceeding £34m over five years. At the same time, reductions in research-active staff directly threaten QR income, grant capture, REF performance, and long-term reputation. When redundancy costs, restructuring costs, and programme closure losses are added, the margin for error narrows considerably.

Rather than providing a stable platform for recovery, the current strategy risks triggering a negative cycle of declining performance and repeated restructuring.

This report sets out a credible alternative built on two pillars:

1. **Controlled savings through natural attrition and workforce rebalancing**, avoiding compulsory redundancies and their destabilising effects.
2. **A federated academic structure** that restores School-level autonomy, embeds professional services closer to delivery, streamlines senior leadership, and aligns capital investment with core mission.

Financial modelling shows that natural attrition and targeted workforce rebalancing can deliver approximately:

- £6.8m per year
- £20.4m over three years
- £34m over five years

These savings are achieved without severance costs, without damaging recruitment performance, and without undermining research income.

The alternative strategy does not rely on shrinking core capacity and hoping for growth. It strengthens the income-generating foundations of the University: teaching quality, research competitiveness, student support, and academically credible leadership.

Why the Current Strategy Is High Risk

The University's strategic case for change proposes annual cost savings of between **£36m and £67.5m by 2029/30**, depending on whether a target student–staff ratio (SSR) of 18 or 22 is adopted. These savings rely primarily on accelerated reductions in academic staffing through voluntary and potentially compulsory redundancies, alongside programme closures and non-pay reductions.

This strategy assumes that significant downsizing can occur while simultaneously delivering academic growth and income expansion. That assumption is highly questionable.

Under the higher surplus scenario, the University projects an additional **£15m of academic growth income by 2029/30**, offsetting **£13m lost through programme closures**. This growth is said to depend on improved recruitment effectiveness and a revised academic growth strategy correcting past forecasting weaknesses.

However, increasing SSRs at the scale proposed directly undermines the conditions required for growth.

Updated modelling, drawing on an analysis (Chevalier and Jia, 2016) linking Guardian league table performance to student applications, indicates that rising SSRs are likely to reduce league table scores and therefore reduce student recruitment and income. The projected impact is significant:

- At an SSR of 18: annual income falls by approximately **£4.2m by 2029/30**, rising to **£6.6m by 2031/32**
- At an SSR of 22: annual income falls by approximately **£7.5m by 2029/30**, rising to **£11.8m by 2031/32**

Cumulatively, over five years, the SSR shock alone could cost the University **in excess of £34m**.

In other words, the mechanism intended to secure savings erodes the recruitment performance on which the financial recovery plan depends.

Research Income Exposure

The proposal to allocate a default 25% research time to Research & Teaching staff risks depressing research output and future REF competitiveness. In Schools facing substantial reductions, workload modelling indicates that effective research time may in practice fall below this nominal allocation once teaching and administrative pressures are taken into account. The combined effect of staff reductions and constrained research time therefore threatens:

- Reduced QR allocations
- Lower grant capture
- Weakened REF positioning
- Longer-term reputational decline

There is limited evidence within the University's financial modelling that these dynamic income risks have been fully incorporated into forward projections.

The Risk of Uncontrolled Loss

The strategy is framed as a managed rebalancing — "doing more of what we are good at and less of what we are not." In practice, large-scale redundancy programmes rarely function as controlled exits.

The signal of potential compulsory redundancy has already prompted external job applications. Staff in well-funded, high-demand or priority areas are more attractive to rival inistutions and therefore more likely to secure alternative employment. Retaining such staff would require unbudgeted retention measures, and even then cannot fully mitigate the perceived instability.

The likely outcome is not strategic pruning but uneven loss of high-performing staff, institutional knowledge and capacity.

The Combined Financial Effect

When tuition losses from SSR increases, reduced research income, programme closure losses (£13m), redundancy and severance costs (£16.5–£33m), and restructuring costs (£4.5–£6.5m) are considered together, the margin for error narrows dramatically.

The proposed approach therefore carries material risk of triggering a negative cycle:

- Higher SSR → weaker recruitment
- Reduced staffing → lower research income
- Falling performance → reputational impact
- Repeated restructuring → further instability

This is not a stable platform for academic growth.

A Credible Alternative

This report sets out a different path: one that delivers savings while protecting the income-generating core of the institution.

The alternative approach rests on two pillars:

1. **A controlled savings programme based on natural attrition and workforce rebalancing**, avoiding the destabilising effects and upfront costs of compulsory redundancies.
2. **A federated academic structure that restores School-level autonomy, strengthens frontline support, and aligns leadership and capital investment with mission delivery.**

The detailed financial modelling in the sections that follow demonstrates that natural attrition alone can deliver:

- **£6.8m per year**

- **£20.4m over three years**
- **£34m over five years**

These savings are achieved without severance costs, without damaging recruitment, and without undermining research performance.

Further savings are available through moderation of senior pay and structural simplification.

Crucially, the alternative model does not rely on shrinking capacity and hoping for growth. It strengthens the parts of the University that generate income — teaching quality, research competitiveness, student support, and School-level strategic initiative.

The remainder of this report sets out the financial modelling, structural reforms and governance changes required to deliver this controlled and sustainable transition.

Saving by attrition and rebalancing

Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, a total of 501 research and teaching (R&T) staff left the organisation—an average of 84 per year. Of these, an average of 18 per year left through retirement. Staff separations vary across units: approximately 43% of leavers were from high student–staff ratio (SSR) units and 57% from low SSR units, where high and low SSR are defined as above or below 18 respectively (as at 2024).

Using the long-term average separations as a proxy for natural attrition, and assuming, for example, an 45% exit rate (i.e. net of replacement) with an average on-cost salary of £90,000 per staff member, natural attrition would generate savings of approximately £3.4 million per year.

Further savings could be achieved through strategic rebalancing of the workforce when replacing the remaining 55% of leavers—for example, by reducing average seniority and increasing the proportion of teaching-focused roles. For example, if replacement appointments were made at an average on-cost salary of £65,000, this would yield additional annual savings of approximately £1.15 million.

Additional savings could arise from retirements above the current average of 18 per year. According to the 2024 Annual Diversity Report, 135 R&T staff were aged over 65, rising from 105 in 2021. Given the sustained growth in staff numbers since the early 2000s, future retirement cohorts are likely to be even larger, suggesting a possible upward trend in retirement-related exits. For example, an additional 27 retirements per year[1], combined with a 45% exit rate and workforce rebalancing, would generate further annual savings of approximately £1.5 million.

[1] A more precise estimate of cohort size in the 60-65 bracket would help deliver a better predictor of future retirement flows. For now we assume 45 retirements per year, which seems realistic based on a stock of over 65s of 135, alongside additional flow.

Overall, a strategy combining natural attrition and targeted workforce rebalancing could deliver savings of around £6 million per year—equivalent to approximately £18 million over three years and £30 million over five years.

Careful planning of the replacement of exits through retirement across all other job families could also deliver further savings. Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, 361 members of staff in job families other than R&T left the organization, i.e. about 60 per year. Assuming an average on-cost salary of £45,000, a 30 percent exit rate could for example deliver additional annual savings of £800,000, e.g. an additional saving of £2.4 million over 3 years and £4 millions over 5 years.

Summary of Savings from Attrition and Workforce Rebalancing			
Category	Annual Saving	3-Year Saving	5-Year Saving
R&T – Natural Attrition (45% non-replacement)	£3.4m	£10.2m	£17.0m
R&T – Workforce Rebalancing (lower-cost replacements)	£1.15m	£3.45m	£5.75m
R&T – Additional Retirements (27 per year)	£1.5m	£4.5m	£7.5m
Total R&T Strategy	~£6.0m	~£18.0m	~£30.0m
Other Job Families – 30% attrition	£0.8m	£2.4m	£4.0m
Overall Total (All Staff Groups)	~£6.8m	~£20.4m	~£34.0m

A Federated Academic Structure for Sustainable Growth

The University's proposed restructuring, which bundles existing Schools and Departments into large "mega-schools", risks creating additional bureaucratic layers and expanding highly paid senior management. This approach introduces new cost pressures while distancing decision-making from the academic work that sustains the institution. It risks increasing overhead at the expense of the staff who deliver teaching, research and student support.

We propose instead a mission-driven restructuring that strengthens, rather than shrinks, the University's academic capacity. This alternative model would:

- Return meaningful budgetary autonomy (transparent contribution based model), staffing oversight and strategic planning to Schools
- Remove unnecessary managerial layers and reduce associated overhead costs
- Redeploy staff capacity toward frontline academic and student-facing services
- Direct expenditure only toward functions that demonstrably enhance teaching, research and student success
- Rebuild trust by restoring clarity of purpose and accountability

Rather than managing decline through consolidation, this approach reinforces the capabilities that generate income, reputation and long-term sustainability.

It is grounded in four strategic principles:

- **Subsidiarity:** decisions should be taken as close as possible to academic delivery
- **Mission alignment:** every role and investment must clearly support teaching, research, or direct student success
- **Accountability:** senior leadership should remain connected to and responsible for core academic functions
- **Sustainable growth:** investment should prioritise capacity that improves performance and generates revenue

There is clear evidence that centralization in Higher Education in the UK has led to expanded professional services and concentration of authority away from academic departments, which has eroded professional autonomy central to academic identity and innovation (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021). From an organizational economics perspective, such centralization reduces responsiveness and constrains research productivity because senior administrators face high information processing costs and are distant from the local knowledge and expertise embedded in individual departments (Milgrom & Roberts, 1992; Holmström & Milgrom, 1991). Decentralization—where individual academic units have greater authority over hiring, internal budgeting, and research strategy—leverages specialized knowledge and aligns incentives more closely with disciplinary research opportunities, allocating resources more efficiently. This improved alignment of authority and expertise theoretically enhances publication output, external grant success, and cost-effective use of institutional resources, suggesting that UK universities can improve both research performance and financial outcomes by balancing central coordination with meaningful decentralization (Hayek, 1945; Aghion, Bloom, Blundell, Griffith, & Howitt, 2005).

There is also strong evidence that academic leadership matters. A recent study (Goodall et al, 2014) shows that research performance improves when departments are led by highly research-active academics. Effective academic units thrive when leadership is intellectually

credible and embedded in disciplinary practice. This stands in contrast to multi-tiered bureaucratic models in which authority is increasingly separated from academic expertise. In short, the evidence is clear: *academic units should be led by academics.*

The proposal that follows therefore sets out a shift toward a genuinely federated university structure. In this model, Schools become the primary engines of strategy, growth and delivery, operating within clear institutional standards and supported by streamlined central leadership.

The underlying principle is straightforward: universities perform best when authority and accountability sit as close as possible to teaching, research, and the students and academics who carry them out.

Restoring Schools as the Core Academic Units

The current multi-layered structure diffuses responsibility and slows decision-making. The Faculty tier should be reduced to a light-touch coordinating role rather than functioning as an executive management layer. Its purpose should be limited to:

- Budget envelope coordination
- Facilitating cross-School collaboration
- Ensuring alignment with institutional financial parameters

It would not control staffing, local service deployment, or academic direction.

Schools would once again become the principal units of academic planning. They would be empowered to:

- Develop medium-term growth strategies in teaching and research
- Identify emerging research and market opportunities
- Propose new programmes and portfolio adjustments
- Shape staffing profiles within agreed financial frameworks

This is not fragmentation; it is alignment. Academics embedded in a discipline are best placed to identify where research funding is expanding, where student demand is growing, and where strategic investment will generate sustainable returns. Central managers, however capable, cannot replicate that disciplinary proximity.

Academic units naturally advocate for their own fields. Rather than restraining that instinct, the University should harness it. Schools seeking growth would submit structured business cases outlining:

- Revenue projections (tuition, grants, partnerships)
- Staffing requirements
- Infrastructure needs

- Risk assessment

The University would assess proposals against sustainability and mission alignment, ensuring ambition is disciplined but not stifled.

Bringing Professional Services Closer to Delivery

For School-level responsibility to be meaningful, key professional services functions should be embedded locally. These include:

- Research development and grant support
- Admissions and recruitment operations
- Student experience coordination
- Local HR partnership

Support staff working alongside academics and students develop contextual knowledge that improves responsiveness and effectiveness. Grant support becomes proactive rather than reactive. Admissions teams better understand subject identity and conversion pathways. Student issues are resolved earlier, improving retention and satisfaction.

At the same time, equity must be preserved. The University should therefore guarantee baseline service levels across all Schools, with centrally monitored standards such as:

- Minimum research development capacity per FTE
- Defined admissions processing timelines
- HR response benchmarks
- Transparent service-level agreements

This creates a federated model: local expertise within institutional guardrails.

Capacity should increase in the areas that directly drive income and reputation — particularly grant capture, recruitment and student support. Protecting and strengthening these functions safeguards institutional knowledge and future income streams.

Streamlined Leadership and Academic Accountability

Central leadership should be simplified and mission-focused. The number of Pro-Vice-Chancellor roles would be reduced to six core briefs:

- Education
- Research & Innovation
- Student Experience & Access
- People & Culture
- Finance & Operations

- International & Partnerships

Appointments would carry term limits — for example, a maximum of three years — followed by a return to substantive teaching and/or research for a minimum period. During their term, PVCs would maintain ongoing academic engagement through teaching or supervision.

This ensures leadership remains grounded in academic reality and accountable to the core functions of the University.

Performance measures at senior level should prioritise:

- Growth in research income and quality
- Recruitment stability and student retention
- Financial sustainability
- Staff and student experience outcomes

Not structural expansion or managerial layering.

A Capital Strategy Anchored to Academic Purpose

Financial resilience requires discipline in capital investment. Major projects not essential to teaching, research or compliance should be paused until core operations are secure.

A Capital Governance Board, with majority academic representation, would review significant projects against clear criteria:

- Demonstrable academic return on investment
- Contribution to income growth or research capacity
- Long-term financial sustainability

Underused or prestige-driven estate should be reviewed for repurposing, consolidation or disposal where appropriate.

This protects critical infrastructure while avoiding unnecessary financial exposure.

Conclusion

This proposal does not reject central coordination. It proposes a rebalancing: strong institutional standards combined with empowered academic units.

By:

- Restoring Schools as strategic actors
- Embedding professional services close to delivery
- Streamlining senior management

- Focusing capital investment on core mission

The University can align structure with purpose. The result is a model that strengthens accountability, improves responsiveness, rebuilds trust, and places growth where it belongs — within the academic communities that generate it.

Overall Conclusions

1. **The current restructuring plan is financially high-risk.**
   The projected savings depend on rising SSRs and rapid staff reductions that are likely to depress recruitment and research income, potentially offsetting much of the anticipated gain.
2. **Growth cannot be delivered through contraction of academic capacity.**
   Increasing workload pressure, reducing research time, and closing programmes undermine the very drivers of future income and reputation.
3. **A controlled attrition-based strategy is financially viable and operationally realistic.**
   Natural turnover and workforce rebalancing can deliver substantial savings over five years without redundancy costs or destabilisation.
4. **Structural reform should strengthen, not centralise, academic capability.**
   A federated model — restoring autonomy to Schools, embedding professional services locally, simplifying leadership, and disciplining capital investment — aligns governance with mission.
5. **The University faces a strategic choice.**
   One path risks a cycle of contraction, reputational decline and repeated restructuring. The other protects academic capacity, rebuilds trust, and delivers sustainable savings while preserving the foundations of future growth.

This report demonstrates that a financially credible, mission-aligned alternative exists. The question is not whether savings can be made — but whether they will be made in a way that safeguards the University's long-term academic strength and institutional stability.

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Institutional Risk: SSR and Rankings

Overview

The December analysis concludes that increasing the University's student–staff ratio (SSR) from 13:1 to the proposed 18–22 range is not a marginal efficiency measure but a fundamental structural shift in institutional positioning. The evidence shows that such a change would move the University outside the operating norms of research-intensive peers, with immediate and material consequences for global rankings, domestic league tables, and research capacity. SSR, as a single aggregated metric, is not a reliable basis for strategic decision-making in a complex research environment, and its use as a primary "rightsizing" tool introduces significant analytical and operational risk.

Modelling indicates that higher SSR would trigger substantial and sustained declines in both QS World Rankings and Guardian league table positions. Even under conservative assumptions, the University exits the global top 100, with longer-term projections suggesting a fall into the 200–270 range as research capacity, citations, and reputation deteriorate. Domestic rankings show similarly sharp declines, driven by the direct and immediate sensitivity of teaching metrics to staffing levels. Importantly, attempts to offset these effects—such as through temporary improvements in citations per faculty—are shown to be short-lived and do not withstand more realistic modelling of research system dynamics.

Beyond rankings, the analysis demonstrates that SSR increases create direct and compounding financial risks through reduced student demand, particularly among international applicants. Estimated losses of £22m–£27m over five years at SSR = 20 arise from Guardian-driven behavioural effects alone, with further downside risk likely once global reputation impacts are considered. Taken together, the findings show that SSR-driven staff reductions do not produce contained efficiency gains, but instead initiate a cycle of declining research performance, reputational weakening, and income loss, with long-term consequences that are difficult to reverse.

We repeat that the purpose of our SSR modelling is not to provide definitive predictions, which would be extremely difficult and require a lengthy academic study, but an indication of likely trends.

Review of the December Report on Student–Staff Ratios and Institutional Risk

In December, UCU delivered a detailed report examining the use of student–staff ratios (SSR) as a primary tool for "rightsizing" academic provision. That report analysed the strategic, financial, and reputational implications of increasing the University's SSR from its current level of 13:1 to the proposed target range of 18–22:1.

This section summarises the principal conclusions of that report and highlights the most material risks for Council. Readers are referred to the full December report for detailed modelling methodology, data sources, and technical appendices

The analysis demonstrates that increasing SSR to the proposed range would not represent a marginal efficiency adjustment. Rather, it would constitute a structural repositioning of the University, with significant consequences for global rankings, domestic league tables, research intensity, and long-term institutional standing.

Context and Current Position

The University currently operates at:

- SSR (Guardian 2026): 13.0
- QS World University Rank (2026): 97
- Guardian Rank (2026): 51
- Typical protected research time allocation: ~33%

The proposed policy would increase SSR to **18–22**, with modelling indicating that protected research time would fall to approximately **25%**.

For context, no traditional Russell Group university currently operates with an SSR above **14.3** (Guardian 2026 dataset). The proposed target range would therefore place Nottingham outside the operating norms of research-intensive peers.

Structural Limitations of a Blanket SSR Target

The December report concluded that a uniform SSR target is analytically crude and strategically misaligned with a research-intensive institution.

SSR compresses highly variable academic activity into a single headcount ratio and does not account for:

- Laboratory, clinical, and PSRB requirements
- Supervision-intensive provision
- Research buy-out and externally funded time
- Variations in assessment and contact intensity

A discipline-level case study in Physics & Astronomy illustrated the point clearly. Across the Russell Group, Physics SSRs cluster between **7.6 and 14.2**, with Nottingham currently at **11.3**. Raising Physics to 18–22 would align it not with research-intensive peers but with institutions operating under fundamentally different academic models.

The conclusion was not that SSR is irrelevant, but that it is not a suitable primary instrument for determining academic capacity across disciplines.

Impact on QS World University Rankings

Why QS is Highly Sensitive to SSR Changes

Although QS does not publish “SSR” directly, staffing levels drive multiple weighted indicators:

- Faculty–Student Ratio (10%)
- Citations per Faculty (20%)
- Academic Reputation (30%)
- Employer Reputation (15%)

Analysis of 88 UK institutions demonstrated strong negative correlations between SSR and all major QS metrics (see December report). In practice, increasing SSR weakens not one component but several simultaneously.

Direct Impact (Lower-Bound Scenario)

Using a comparator-based proximity model that adjusts only the Faculty–Student Ratio (holding other indicators constant), the projected QS outcomes are:

SSR	FSR	Projected QS Rank
13 (current)	45.6	97
18	10.2	118
20	7.1	122
22	6.0	124 (extrapolated)

Even under conservative assumptions, Nottingham would fall out of the global top 100.

Full Dynamic Impact (Research and Reputation Effects)

A second, dynamic model simulated cascading effects:

- Reduced research time → lower citations (5-year lag)
- Citation decline → reduced academic reputation (3-year lag)
- Reputation decline → reduced employer perception
- Immediate collapse in Faculty–Student Ratio

Under this model, the projected QS rank at **SSR = 20** evolves as follows:

Time After Implementation	Projected Rank
Year 2	~156
Year 5	~215
Year 10	~240

At **SSR = 22**, the Year 10 projection is approximately **~268**.

The modelling indicates:

- An immediate exit from the top 100
- A medium-term fall of 100+ places
- Long-term stabilisation around the 200–270 range

Crucially, the lag in citation and reputation metrics may create short-term reassurance, but the long-term trajectory is significantly downward once research capacity is reduced.

Sector-Wide Adjustment Scenario

The December report also modelled a scenario in which all UK universities increased SSR to 20. Even under that assumption, Nottingham falls from **97 to approximately 120**.

Global ranking position is determined by international comparison, not domestic relative movement. Sector-wide deterioration would not materially protect Nottingham's global standing.

Impact on Guardian League Tables

The Guardian ranking is even more directly sensitive to SSR:

- SSR weight: **15%** (50% higher than QS's 10% FSR component)
- No research metrics to offset SSR deterioration
- Immediate impact (no lag)

Direct SSR Effect Only

Holding other indicators constant:

SSR	Projected Guardian Rank
13 (current)	51
18	74
20	82
22	92

The University would move from the upper half of UK institutions to the lower half.

Including Secondary Effects

More realistic modelling incorporated likely consequences of larger class sizes and reduced academic capacity:

- Lower NSS teaching satisfaction
- Lower feedback satisfaction
- Reduced career support outcomes
- Decline in value-added scores

Under moderate-to-severe cascading assumptions:

SSR	Projected Rank Range
18	74–94
20	82–105

22	92–119

At SSR = 20, Nottingham would likely fall into the bottom third of UK universities.

The December analysis also examined the argument that entry tariff increases could offset ranking decline. To maintain rank 51 at higher SSR levels would require:

SSR	**Required Entry Tariff**
13	151 (current) (A*AA)
18	193 (AAAA)
20	210 (A*A*AA)
22	210 (A*A*AA)

For reference, Oxford's tariff is approximately 197. Increases in average tariff to this extent are not realistically achievable.

In addition, recruiting to meet such increases in tariff to compensate for SSR changes is not realistically achievable, particularly with the impact of the secondary impact of SSR changes on the desirability of studying at this University.

Strategic Implications

The December report concluded that raising SSR to 18–22 would have three cumulative effects:

1. Immediate Competitive Repositioning

- Exit from QS top 100
- Significant Guardian decline
- SSR outside Russell Group operating norms

2. Medium-Term Research Erosion (3–5 years)

- Reduced grant capture
- Lower citation intensity
- Declining academic reputation

3. Long-Term Structural Drift (5–10 years)

- Repositioning as a teaching-intensive institution
- Reduced international competitiveness
- Increased difficulty recruiting high-performing staff
- Reputational weakening that is slow and costly to reverse

The modelling indicates that the ranking effects are not temporary fluctuations but structural adjustments to reduced staffing intensity.

Conclusions

The December analysis found that the proposed SSR increase:

- Is likely to generate large and measurable ranking declines
- Would move the University outside the research-intensive operating range of its peers
- Produces effects that compound over time
- Creates reputational risks that are difficult to reverse

The evidence suggests that SSR-driven rightsizing is not a neutral efficiency measure. It represents a structural shift in institutional positioning with significant long-term implications.

Reflections on SSR/data deep dive sessions

In the aftermath of this report and the broader counterproposal to course closures, the University met with trade unions for a series of “deep dive” sessions, including one entitled “SSR/data”. These meetings were framed by management as exercises in information sharing rather than decision-making, and in practice they largely functioned in that way. From the outset, management emphasised the difficulty of modelling the impact of changes in student–staff ratios (SSR), arguing that there are too many uncertainties to produce reliable forecasts. While we recognise that modelling in this area is necessarily imperfect, the union’s view is that this does not justify abandoning analysis altogether. Our own modelling, though based on simplifying but well-motivated assumptions, is intended to identify potentially dangerous trends. In the absence of more robust analysis from management, indicative modelling of this kind represents a necessary attempt to understand the risks associated with rising SSR, and is preferable to making major structural decisions on the basis of little more than hope that negative effects will not materialise.

A central issue in the discussions concerned how staff funded by research grants are treated in the SSR calculation. Management explained that their internal "operational SSR" excludes staff on 100% research buy-outs but continues to count staff whose salaries are only partially bought out by grants. The union repeatedly raised concerns about this approach. If staff whose time is significantly committed to externally funded research are nevertheless counted fully towards teaching capacity, the resulting SSR will overstate the teaching resource actually available to students. This risks creating a situation in which schools appear to meet SSR targets on paper while lacking the staff capacity required to deliver teaching. It also raises concerns about the treatment of grant-funded time, since research funders expect staff effort charged to grants to reflect genuine research activity. Management were initially reluctant to share details of the methodology, but following sustained pushback did provide further information and presented additional detail in later sessions. However, they have so far shown little willingness to reconsider the treatment of partial buy-outs, despite the clear methodological and practical problems this creates.

The discussions also highlighted broader concerns about the way the data underlying SSR are constructed. Management indicated that adjustments had been made to account for suspended courses and areas where recruitment had been weak due to tariff decisions, and acknowledged that historic data already contain lags reflecting earlier fluctuations in student numbers. These points reinforce the union's argument that snapshot measures of SSR provide a weak basis for long-term staffing decisions. If student demand is inherently difficult to forecast — a point repeatedly acknowledged during the meetings — then relying heavily on a single metric derived from uncertain projections introduces significant strategic risk for both teaching provision and research capacity.

By the final session, little had substantively shifted in management's position. While they acknowledged that SSR is an imperfect measure, they continued to maintain that it nevertheless has practical "uses" and confirmed that it will remain a key tool for "rightsizing" the institution. In other words, the deep dive sessions and the evidence presented by unions did not materially change the strategic direction being pursued. Their main value was therefore in clarifying the assumptions and limitations underlying the University's approach, and in demonstrating that many of the union's concerns about SSR — particularly around transparency, modelling, and methodological robustness — remain unresolved.

CPF and the Escalation of QS Risk

UCU understands that University management has suggested to Council that increases in student–staff ratio may not materially damage QS ranking performance because of their effect on Citations per Faculty (CPF). The argument is that reducing academic staff immediately lowers the denominator in the CPF calculation while citation counts (the numerator) persist for longer. On this basis, CPF would temporarily rise, potentially offsetting losses elsewhere in the QS framework.

Given the strategic importance of QS positioning, we tested this claim directly.

It is important to recall that the December modelling already incorporated the long-term effect of reduced research time on citation performance. As previously noted:

> "Reduced research time progressively suppresses citation output, and thus Nottingham's CPF score declines toward a lower long-term value even if short-term citations remain temporarily buoyed by legacy outputs."

The relevant question is therefore not whether a short-lived statistical uplift is possible, but whether CPF can realistically stabilise QS outcomes once research capacity is structurally reduced.

Modelling QS rankings with correlated CPF changes

As a robustness check, we modelled the most optimistic version of the internal argument: that CPF increases mechanically in proportion to SSR (i.e. citation stock unchanged, staff reduced). Mathematically, we imposed the following relation in our code:

$$\text{New CPF} = \text{Old CPF} \times \text{Old SSR} / \text{New SSR}$$

Under that highly restrictive assumption, projected QS rankings were superficially stabilized. However, this scenario assumes:

- No decline in research productivity,
- No impact from reduced protected research time (33% → 25%),
- No loss of high-performing researchers,
- No deterioration in reputation,
- No structural shift in institutional research environment.

It therefore describes a temporary accounting effect, not a plausible medium- or long-term institutional trajectory.

A more appropriate approach is to model CPF using the same **proximity-weighted comparator framework** used in the original analysis to convert SSR into Faculty–Student Ratio (FSR) scores.

Rather than assuming that Nottingham's research profile remains unchanged, this method asks:

> What level of CPF performance is actually observed among universities operating at this SSR?

This approach reflects:

- The empirically observed coupling between staffing intensity and research output,
- The research environment typical of institutions at higher SSR,
- The broader ecosystem effects of reduced academic capacity.

When CPF is modelled empirically in this way, the outcomes worsen significantly..

SSR	QS Rank (No CPF Change)	QS Rank (CPF via Proximity Model)
18	118	156
19	118	180
20	122	181
21	122	166

Under proximity-based CPF modelling:

- Rankings deteriorate well beyond the direct FSR-only impact.
- Outcomes align with — and in places amplify — the earlier dynamic projections.
- The short-term stabilisation seen under mechanical uplift disappears entirely.

It is also notable that the proximity model cannot generate credible outputs at **SSR = 22**, due to the absence of research-intensive comparator institutions operating at that staffing level within the QS dataset. That absence is itself revealing: the proposed target range moves Nottingham into territory where research-intensive comparators effectively cease to exist.

Why Introducing CPF Makes the Picture Worse

CPF carries a **20% weighting** in the QS framework — double the weight of Faculty–Student Ratio.

When CPF is treated as structurally responsive to staffing intensity (as the empirical data indicate), the effect is not neutral. It compounds the damage:

- FSR declines immediately.
- Research time falls structurally.
- Citation generation slows.
- Academic reputation (30% weight) weakens.
- Employer reputation follows.
- CPF itself converges toward the lower equilibrium observed among higher-SSR institutions.

In other words, once CPF is modelled realistically rather than mechanically, it becomes an amplifier of decline, not a buffer against it.

The earlier dynamic modelling already demonstrated that at **SSR = 20**, projected QS ranking falls to approximately:

- ~156 (Year 2)
- ~215 (Year 5)
- ~240 (Year 10)

The proximity-based CPF modelling reinforces that trajectory. The deterioration is not limited to the 10% FSR component — it extends deeply into the 20% CPF and 30% Academic Reputation components.

Conclusion

The suggestion that CPF can mitigate QS risk rests on a short-term statistical effect arising from denominator reduction. That effect is transitional and fragile.

When CPF is modelled empirically — using the behaviour of real comparator institutions and taking research-environment changes into account — higher SSR leads to substantially worse ranking outcomes than FSR changes alone would suggest.

Introducing CPF as a realistic variable does not stabilise QS projections. It intensifies them.

Accordingly:

- CPF cannot credibly function as a mitigation strategy.
- Once structural research effects are incorporated, ranking decline accelerates.
- The proposed SSR increase carries materially greater QS risk than suggested by mechanical uplift arguments.

This reinforces the earlier conclusion that SSR-driven staff reductions do not produce contained ranking adjustments. They trigger multi-indicator deterioration across the QS framework .

Impact of rising SSR on undergraduate admissions

The previous report demonstrated that rising student–staff ratios are likely to depress Guardian League Table performance. Ranking shifts, however, are not purely reputational: they affect student behaviour and therefore income.

In this section, we model how SSR-driven reductions in Guardian score translate into changes in undergraduate applications and associated tuition fee income.

We draw on the econometric analysis of Chevalier and Jia (Chevalier and Jia, 2016) , who estimate how subject-level applications respond to changes in Guardian subject scores. Because SSR increases are being applied broadly across Schools rather than confined to isolated subjects, it is reasonable to approximate subject-level score movements using changes in the University's overall Guardian score as a proxy for widespread subject-level effects.

While this remains an approximation, it is conceptually aligned with the institutional nature of the proposed SSR increases.

Econometric Framework

Chevalier and Jia model changes in applications as a function of changes in standardised Guardian scores:

$$\log(A+\Delta A)-\log(A)=\beta\,\Delta Sstd$$

where:

$$\Delta Sstd=\Delta Sraw/\sigma$$

Here:

- A = baseline applications
- $\Delta Sraw$ = change in Guardian overall score
- σ = cross-institution standard deviation of Guardian overall scores
- β = domicile-specific semi-elasticity

Using the 2026 Guardian dataset, the cross-institution standard deviation is: $\sigma=12.69$

This yields the proportional application change: $\Delta A/A=e(\beta/\sigma)\Delta Sraw-1$

Application semi-elasticities are:

- UK: $\beta = 0.018$
- EU: $\beta = 0.056$
- Non-EU: $\beta = 0.074$

Baseline applications:

- UK: 7,667
- Non-UK: 1,392

Because we do not have an EU/non-EU split, we model a range for non-UK:

- Lower-bound sensitivity: $\beta = 0.056$
- Upper-bound sensitivity: $\beta = 0.074$

Fee Assumptions

Year	Homes Fees (£)	Overseas Fees (£)
2026/27	9,970	33,000
2027/28	10,050	33,800
2028/29	10,300	34,650
2029/30	10,550	35,500
2030/31	10,800	36,350

Income effects accumulate over multiple cohorts, meaning that reductions in a single intake year produce multi-year revenue losses.

Delayed-Impact Scenario (More Realistic)

Under this scenario, ranking deterioration affects admissions from 2027/28 entry onwards.

SSR = 18:

Annual Income Impact (£)

Year	Total Change (Low)	Total Change (High)
2026/27	0	0
2027/28	-1.69m	-2.04m
2028/29	-3.47m	-4.19m
2029/30	-5.34m	-6.44m
2030/31	-5.47m	-6.60m

Cumulative after 5 years:

- Low: **-£15.97m**
- High: **-£19.23m**

SSR = 20:

Annual Income Impact (£)

Year	Total Change (Low)	Total Change (High)
2026/27	0	0
2027/28	-2.36m	-2.85m
2028/29	-4.85m	-5.84m

2029/30	-7.45m	-8.97m
2030/31	-7.62m	-9.19m

Cumulative after 5 years:

- Low: **-£22.29m**
- High: **-£26.85m**

SSR = 22

Annual Income Impact (£)

Year	Total Change (Low)	Total Change (High)
2026/27	0	0
2027/28	-3.03m	-3.64m
2028/29	-6.21m	-7.47m
2029/30	-9.54m	-11.48m
2030/31	-9.77m	-11.76m

Cumulative after 5 years:

- Low: **-£28.55m**
- High: **-£34.34m**

Immediate-Impact Scenario (Less Realistic but Illustrative)

If admissions decline from 2026/27 entry, losses are larger due to compounding across cohorts.

SSR = 20 (Illustrative Example)

Year	Total Change (Low)	Total Change (High)
2026/27	-2.32m	-2.79m
2027/28	-4.73m	-5.70m
2028/29	-7.27m	-8.76m
2029/30	-7.45m	-8.97m
2030/31	-7.62m	-9.19m

Cumulative after 5 years:

- Low: **-£29.38m**
- High: **-£35.44m**

At SSR = 22, five-year cumulative losses rise to:

- Low: **-£37.65m**
- High: **-£45.37m**

Structural Observations

Three conclusions follow clearly from the modelling:

1. **International exposure dominates revenue risk.**
   Because overseas applicants are significantly more sensitive to ranking changes and pay substantially higher fees, relatively small proportional changes generate large financial effects.

2. **Losses compound over time.**
   Each weaker cohort reduces income across multiple financial years.
3. **The modelling is conservative.**
   It:
   - Does not incorporate QS-driven behavioural effects,
   - Does not assume reputational threshold effects,
   - Does not model competitive displacement dynamics.

Accordingly, downside risk may be understated.

Conclusion

The admissions modelling reinforces the central conclusion of this report.

Raising SSR does not simply create reputational risk. It creates measurable, modelled, and compounding revenue risk.

Under the more realistic delayed-impact scenario:

- Moving to SSR 18 produces 5-year losses of **£16m–£19m**.
- Moving to SSR 20 produces losses of **£22m–£27m**.
- Moving to SSR 22 produces losses of **£29m–£34m**.

These figures arise solely from Guardian-driven behavioural effects and exclude QS-driven international sensitivity.

When combined with:

- QS ranking deterioration,
- CPF structural decline,
- Research capacity erosion,

the financial implications extend well beyond short-term staffing savings.

Institutional Risk: Research Excellence

The proposed cuts pose significant systemic risks to elite-level research by undermining the core conditions that sustain research excellence. Key performance indicators—research quality, income, talent pipelines, and institutional reputation—are all tightly coupled to staffing levels and the strength of the research environment. The planned reduction in academic FTE, alongside cuts to technical support and postgraduate research (PGR) capacity, will erode the dense intellectual networks that underpin high-performing research cultures. Increased centralisation and the diversion of funds from research into capital projects further risk slowing grant processes and reducing institutional agility, while the loss of REF Units of Assessment directly threatens future quality-related (QR) funding streams.

These structural changes disrupt the self-reinforcing “multiplier effect” that drives research success: established researchers attract grant income, which funds PGRs and early career researchers (ECRs), generating outputs that enhance REF performance and secure further funding. Redundancies—particularly among mid- and senior-career academics—break this cycle, leading to immediate and longer-term declines in grant income, output, and reputation. Simultaneously, increased teaching loads and the closure of key undergraduate and postgraduate pathways weaken the pipeline into research, reduce cross-subsidy, and limit the time and capacity needed for high-quality grant writing and collaboration.

Over time, these impacts compound. In the short term, financial metrics may appear to stabilise, but early signs of decline will include loss of staff and reduced grant capture. In the medium term, REF performance, PhD recruitment, and institutional attractiveness will deteriorate, accompanied by intellectual stagnation as fewer new ideas and researchers enter the system. Long term, the university risks irreversible transition from a research-intensive institution to a teaching-led one. The fragility of research ecosystems means such damage is difficult to rebuild, with reputational decline and talent flight creating a one-way trajectory away from elite research status.

Institutional Risk: Civic and Regional Impact

Overview

This section argues that the scale and speed of the proposed cuts present risks that extend well beyond internal financial and operational concerns, threatening the University's historic role as a civic "anchor" institution. The University of Nottingham has long combined global ambition with deep local engagement, contributing to economic growth, social mobility, and regional partnerships. However, evidence from across the public sector shows that large-scale staffing reductions and capacity loss can quickly destabilise this role. If weakened, the University risks entering a negative cycle in which reputational damage, reduced community trust, and diminished civic presence undermine recruitment, research opportunities, and long-term growth.

The analysis highlights that current restructuring proposals risk shifting the University from a "just anchor"—one that actively supports its region—to a diminished and less engaged institution. Reductions in staffing, particularly in areas such as widening participation, civic engagement, research support, and partnerships, are already eroding the capacity needed to sustain local collaborations and initiatives. This threatens key opportunities linked to regional devolution (including engagement with the East Midlands Combined County Authority), as well as flagship programmes such as the Col(l)abatory and place-based research partnerships. Such losses would weaken performance in major frameworks including REF and KEF, reduce access to collaborative funding, and damage the University's ability to deliver impact-driven research.

More broadly, the cuts risk undermining core strategic advantages tied to civic engagement, including student recruitment, graduate outcomes, and institutional reputation. Widening participation and EDI—both central to the University's mission and performance metrics—are particularly exposed, with potential knock-on effects for TEF outcomes, league table positions, and funding opportunities. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the proposed restructuring constitutes a form of "academic austerity" that not only reduces current capacity but also constrains future growth. The resulting damage to civic relationships, research ecosystems, and regional partnerships may be difficult to reverse, creating long-term strategic risks for both the University and the wider Nottingham area.

The University of Nottingham's civic history

This institution has had community and civic engagement at its heart. From its opening in 1881, supported by the Nottingham Corporation, through its move to University Park in 1928 on land donated by local philanthropist Sir Jesse Boot, to the present day and its recent Civic Agreement as part of

'Universities for Nottingham'. As historian Professor John Beckett has argued, while Nottingham may claim to be Britain's 'first global University', it has also made great efforts to be a powerful local and regional voice.

Successful universities as 'just anchors'

Universities are often understood as 'anchor' institutions in their cities and regions, with a large number of mutually-beneficial multiplier effects for both university and local area, acting not just as important employers but also playing a crucial, place-based role in economic, social, and cultural developments. This role, however, isn't always positive, and, carried out poorly, anchoring can in fact lead to displacement and significant community anger. In an increasingly turbulent social, political, and economic context - both in terms of higher education and local/regional politics more generally - Universities can actually become *more* vulnerable if their anchor role is carried out improperly. To succeed, therefore, Universities must be 'just' anchors that promote active engagement and citizenship with the local community as well as their own staff and students.

The role of the anchor institution is therefore complex. Done well, anchoring can sustain valuable community links, improve reputation, research opportunities, and revenue, and, in some cases, even increase league table position. But done badly the opposite can happen, creating a significant downward spiral. Drawing lessons from across the public- and third-sectors, including social housing providers and local authorities, in the face of restructuring, significant staff losses, and reduced capacity, a local anchor role can quickly increase risk and stymie the potential for future growth. Reputation is vital here, and while it can take a long time to build it can be damaged very quickly.

Nationally there is recognition of the huge economic impact of universities (estimated as up to £158 billion), yet similarly important is the role they can play, as 'just' anchor institutions, in 'levelling up' and reducing socio-economic inequalities. Universities UK have also expressed their support for Civic Universities, emphasising the rich opportunities for engaging with processes of devolution such as we see in Nottingham with the new East Midlands Combined Country Authority (EMCCA). UoN has been part of this important trend in recent years, not just pushing the Universities for Nottingham civic agreement, but also publishing its Civic Strategic Development Plan, developing local healthcare partnerships, launching the Col(l)abatory Research Hub, and publishing a Student Living Strategy.

The risks of academic austerity

Taken together, these plans, agreements and strategies demonstrate the institutional commitment to the city and region which have, up until now, maintained UoN's status as a 'just' anchor. Yet we argue here that this civic contribution is being threatened by Future Nottingham. This not only undermines what we believe the University should be in and of itself, but also carries with it a number of existential risks related to student recruitment, league table performance, research income, impact, and EDI and widening participation more generally which we discuss below.

This speaks to wider concerns with forms of restructure and 'rightsizing' that verge on a form of 'academic austerity'. Future Nottingham's focus on cost saving and surplus generation runs the risk of harming precisely the things that make the institution so good, but also, as evidenced by much research into austerity itself, such cuts limit key areas for future growth and revenue generation - and can even, as with some UK local authorities, lead to bankruptcy.

Doing nothing, as we are frequently told, carries risk for UoN. But so does doing the wrong things. Such significant reduction in staffing carried out so quickly is, we argue, unduly risky. Reduction of staffing from Phase 1 in key areas such as widening participation, campaigning and alumni relations, EDI, and policy/impact, has already reduced the University's civic capacity, and the recent decision to disband the civic committee raises additional concerns. Alongside this, the reputational damage associated with many of the proposed course closures - perhaps especially related to music and languages given their outsized role in contributing to the wider Nottingham community - jeopardise local relationships, and with it the University's civic status and capacity to act as a 'just' anchor.

The following sections lay out specific concerns in more detail, emphasising the added risk to the institution that may emerge from Future Nottingham.

Links to East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA)

There are significant research funding and collaboration opportunities through EMCCA following its devolution deal, while Russell Group universities themselves have helped generate over £1.3 billion for the region's economy. If we diminish our presence and staffing, especially regarding local research then we are at risk of missing out on clear opportunities for reputational growth, potential impact case studies (these are explored below in more detail, but are central to the financial and economic success of the institution), and even collaborative funding.

The University has recently signed the new EMCCA compact, an agreement which "sets out a shared commitment to closer collaboration on issues that matter to people, communities, and businesses in the East Midlands". Not only do the increased risks caused by the proposed scale of, and methodology for, the Phase 2 restructure seem to undermine the laudable ambitions of the compact, but the compact itself defines itself as being underpinned by "[t]ransparency, accountability and evidence-informed decision-making". Sadly all three of these have been absent from Future Nottingham, leading University staff to declare a Vote of no Confidence in the University executive.

EMCCA's first wave of skills and growth programmes and the Universities Compact give the University of Nottingham clear routes to co-design a wide range of funded interventions that not only benefit the institution, but also the local community. Reduced capacity to support such civic activities therefore carries risk in the short term and could lead to mid and long term issues around recruitment, league table performance, and research income. There could also be knock-on impacts related to our ability to properly function as part of the Midlands Innovation strategic research and innovation partnership.

Civic engagement

Civic engagement has been shown to play an important role in recruitment both locally - especially relating to widening participation, discussed below - and globally. Not only can civic activities provide a direct pathway for students, but it can also greatly improve standing and trust in the institution, and ultimately student experience. Civic reputation takes a long time and a lot of effort to build, but can disappear extremely quickly.

We are also starting to see that civic and social engagement is starting to feed into international league tables, and there is also a new 'Civic Impact Framework'. Given the league table risks that have been demonstrated by our SSR modelling, there are a wide range of risks related to damaging our capacity for civic engagement. Civic engagement also has clear and strong links with knowledge exchange and impact, which are discussed in more detail below.

Col(l)abatory

The Col(l)abatory is a "pioneering 8 year, £7.4m project supported by Research England, Nottingham Trent University, the University of Nottingham, the Universities for Nottingham partnership, the University of Leicester, De Montfort University, Loughborough University, and the Universities Partnership". Launched in 2022 it funds PhD studentships and research placements, prioritising local researchers from non-standard academic backgrounds. An important and innovative local scheme which has real benefits for the city and region, there are real risks that UoN's involvement could be significantly reduced with by significant staff loss and less emphasis on local and civic engagement.

Widening Participation and its many values

Widening participation (WP) is an important part of any University. It is not only important in and of itself, being central to any 'just anchor's' desires for aiding social mobility, but beyond this moral case there are also more instrumental elements related to our local outreach. Not only can improved WP activities help access more government funding, but they also can improve reputation and thus recruitment. What is more, precisely by diversifying forms of recruitment it can also help make student numbers more resilient and thus aid longer term financial planning. Added to this, UCAS data shows more students than ever before are living at home and studying at local institutions, and so UoN's local reputation matters more than ever. Finally, UoN has had longstanding success regarding graduate outcomes. But with TEF benchmarking taking into account student demographics, threats to WP success could see further reputational and league table damage as in effect UoN would offer less 'value added' to its student cohort. It is therefore likely that reduced WP will have a negative impact on our TEF scores, and with that reputation and recruitment.

While UoN states its commitment to widening participation, Phase 1 saw significant job losses in the area, and with Phase 2 there is risk of further reducing capacity. WP is not just important to the UoN mission, but has significant financial and reputational benefits.

EDI risks

Much like the example of WP, Equality, Diversion, and Inclusion (EDI) is dually important for UoN. Again, there is the clear moral case for any 'just anchor', but research also shows how improved EDI increases staff happiness, productivity, and retainment while also leading to better decision making overall. UKRI has also shown how increased EDI can help with innovation, knowledge exchange, and even grant capture itself. Strong EDI efforts can also have a positive impact on QS and other league table rankings given the explicit focus on 'equality', and there is evidence to suggest that prospective students value commitments to EDI when making application choices. UoN has historically performed well as part of the Athena Swan scheme, but changes from FN1 and FN2 put this accreditation at risk - both institutionally and at School level. This could again lead to reputational damage and reduced student recruitment and staff retention.

The recent removal of an explicit focus on EDI, replaced with a wider focus on People and Culture, has already been a concern for many staff. These concerns are reflected in the recent and extremely concerning results from the People and Culture survey, as well as a consistent failure for UoN to produce meaningful and timely 'Equality Impact Assessments' throughout the Future Nottingham process, violating the Equality Act 2010.

The wider impacts of reduced staffing and thus reduced staff capacity coupled with the removal of EDI as an institutional priority will heavily restrict valuable work towards improving our EDI performance. This will hinder Schools and the University when applying to renew or advance Athena Swan awards, and in maintaining our bronze Race Equality Charter award.

Knowledge Exchange Framework

UoN's anchor role has been central to its comparative success in the Knowledge Exchange Framework. Our ability to engage with local business and third/public sector bodies improves our capacity as a research intensive institution, but also our ability to help with graduate outcomes, teaching quality, and even help amplify place-based growth. The value of this civic and local interaction has been central to our previous KEF submissions, and in particular we have previously over performed in areas of community engagement and supporting local growth and regeneration. The risk to our 'just anchor' states could damage our standing in the KEF, and with it reputation, student recruitment, and revenue.

Research Excellence Framework and potential around loss of impact

Many of these above concerns speak to an increased risk for the next round of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which is central to UoN's status and finance. We have often performed very strongly with our 'Research Environment' scores, however these will be put severely at risk through any reduction in EDI and civic engagement.

What is more, In the REF2021 submission 43 impact case studies were grounded in the local area out of a total of 135 submitted. This is a significant number and quite rightly these types of

community-embedded impact are something that the University has prided itself on. Reducing not just staffing capacity and potential diversity, but also our ability to engage with our locality could significantly worsen our REF performance, and with it lose access to funding, suffer in league tables, and see reduced student interest.

Jeopardise research income with potential partners

The funding landscape is such that we know more and more funding requires partnerships, and the UKRI funding priorities are increasingly emphasising the importance of 'place based' research that has clear links to the government industrial strategy. This kind of funding requires meaningful engagement and robust place-based partnerships. The uncertainty around area closures and potential job-losses, alongside the reputational concerns from coverage of Phase 2 may jeopardise the possibility. We have also seen reduction in capacity for research support and outreach from Phase 1, further risking access to these funds.

This may especially be the case with any rapid response calls that require deep and meaningful engagement with the surrounding area and groups therein in order for them to be pulled together at speed. Losing significant staffing threatens this. It is difficult to see how cutting the time available for research amongst R&T staff, and increasing the volume of students that all staff teach and support in their studies will help alleviate this. Research has also shown how the stronger and more just a university's anchor role, the more successful it is at embedded and participatory research, and with this increased REF and league table performance and research income.

Ultimately the potential risks of such a significant and high-profile restructure are significant. Not only are relationships lost with the staff that are leaving, but also other institutions in the region may be perceived as more stable and thus better to partner with.

Student placements and employability

Prospective students are increasingly prioritising employability and placement opportunities when selecting universities. Consequently, as shown by Universities UK, a university's ability to offer local student placements helps not just with recruitment but also graduate outcomes and league table positions, with the access to placements of disproportionate benefit to WP students. There are clear links between an institution's status as a just anchor and its ability to offer suitable local student placements, and so there is a significant risk to a reduction in both UoN's local and civic activity, as well as its placement infrastructure and offerings (both of which were reduced in Phase 1).

Governance and Process Risks

This section identifies serious concerns about governance, transparency, and decision-making across the Future Nottingham programme. While these issues are most clearly visible in the handling of course suspensions, similar patterns arise in SSR modelling and wider restructuring decisions. In each case, formal compliance has been asserted, but the available evidence suggests a gap between stated process and actual practice.

Governance processes and course suspensions

The University has stated that governance processes were followed in suspending courses. The timeline indicates otherwise. Heads of School were informed shortly before staff on 5 November 2025. Courses were removed from UCAS by 7 November. Senate was consulted only on 13 November, and Council approval followed on 25 November, after implementation had already begun.

School and Faculty endorsement

The Quality Manual is explicit: course suspension requires School and Faculty endorsement, with clear evidence retained for audit. Notification is not endorsement.

Multiple Heads of School have confirmed that no such endorsement was given in their areas, including CLAS, Humanities, BioSciences, Health Sciences, and Physics and Astronomy. This is a direct breach of the University's own stated procedures.

In its formal response, the University acknowledges three explicit departures from Section 4.1 of the Quality Manual:

- Suspensions were initiated by Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellors rather than Schools.
- Consultation with other Schools took place through Faculty PVCs at UEB rather than through school governance structures.
- Information was managed centrally by a suspensions group rather than flowing through School committees.

The University labels these "managed exceptions due to confidentiality requirements." This admission is significant: it is a written acknowledgement that the Quality Manual procedure was not fully followed. The confidentiality justification has no basis in the Quality Manual as a permitted ground for disapplying the endorsement requirement, and no other publicly available governance document provides UEB with authority to do so.

The University's argument that Faculty PVCs satisfy the endorsement requirement because they were involved in developing the proposals is structurally circular. Endorsement is a check mechanism requiring a body separate from the decision-maker to scrutinise and support a proposal before it proceeds. A body

cannot both propose and endorse its own proposal and satisfy that requirement. The Quality Manual's examples of endorsing bodies (Head of School, Education and Student Experience Committee) are clearly distinct from the Faculty PVC role within UEB.

The Quality Manual does permit endorsement to be recorded informally by email. The University has not produced any such documentation. Until it does, the UCU's position on this point is well-founded.

Senate oversight and the QSC Chair's Action procedure

The Quality Manual designates QSC as the approval body for course suspensions. The university routed the suspensions through the Outside Regulations procedure, using Chair's Action by the QSC Chair and Deputy Chair. However, the Outside Regulations procedure is designed to grant exceptions to Quality Manual regulations where their strict application would have a disproportionate impact on a specific student or group of students. Chair's Action within that procedure is reserved for cases involving a cohort of students in that context. Using it to process an institutional decision to suspend 42 courses is an application of the mechanism well outside its intended scope, and does not constitute a finding that the university complied with the regulatory steps it was required to follow.

Two further concerns apply regardless of that procedural question. First, no form of Chair's Action could substitute for the substantive deliberation a full committee would exercise on questions of academic quality, PSRB requirements, pedagogic viability, and strategic alignment. Procedural sign-off and substantive academic scrutiny are different things. Second, QSC is a sub-committee of the Education and Student Experience Committee (ESEC), which is itself a Senate sub-committee. Senate's constitutional responsibility under the University's Charter to oversee teaching and research is broader than any individual Quality Manual procedure. Suspending 42 courses across multiple Schools without full Senate consideration raises a legitimate constitutional question that the use of Chair's Action does not resolve.

The programme performance model

This is another significant substantive concern, and the one the University's response does not address.

The programme performance model was the primary determinant of which 42 courses were identified for suspension. The University's response makes no claim that QSC, Senate committees, or any academic governance body reviewed the model's methodology, inputs, or outputs. Schools and Faculties have not been able to test or validate them. There is no record of Senate or its sub-committees scrutinising the model.

This matters for two reasons. First, it goes directly to Senate's constitutional function: if the model driving major academic decisions has never been subject to academic governance scrutiny, Senate's oversight role has in practice been bypassed regardless of whether individual Quality Manual procedures were technically satisfied.

Second, it has regulatory implications under OfS Conditions B2, E1, and E2. If the model has methodological weaknesses (for example, in how it treats specialist subjects such as Music and Modern Languages, or how it accounts for cross-disciplinary and reputational value) and no qualified academic body reviewed those weaknesses before decisions were taken, the suspension decisions may lack a robust academic evidence base.

The University should either demonstrate that the model was reviewed by a qualified academic governance body, or make explicit that Faculty PVCs exercised independent academic judgement in applying the model's outputs rather than treating them as determinative. Neither has been offered.

Student consultation

The University has relied on a provision of the Quality Manual which states that where teach-out is confirmed for all currently registered students, formal consultation is not required. This reliance is unsound.

The Quality Manual's Changes in 2026 page records that the "Closing or suspending a course" page was updated in January 2026, more than two months after the November 2025 suspensions. It is this post-hoc version of the page that contains the teach-out exemption from consultation. At the time the suspensions were enacted, no such dispensation existed in the Quality Manual.

The University therefore relied, in its formal response to UCU, on a rule that had not yet been written when the conduct it seeks to justify was carried out. The University cannot retrospectively apply a provision to decisions taken before that provision existed.

Retrospective amendment of the Quality Manual

The January 2026 amendment raises a concern that is independent of, and additional to, the student consultation failure.

The Quality Manual was amended in January 2026, while the governance dispute with UCU was live and the University's conduct was under active challenge, in a way that introduced a substantive new dispensation which happened to provide retrospective justification for a procedure the University had already followed without authorisation. The University's own changes log describes this amendment only as "corrections and clarifications made to the content." Introducing an entirely new exemption from a mandatory consultation requirement is not a correction or clarification: it is a substantive change to the governing framework.

The effect, whether intended or not, was that the document by which the University's conduct would be assessed was altered after that conduct had been challenged. This is a serious governance concern in its own right. Council should be asked to confirm:

- Whether the January 2026 amendment to the “Closing or suspending a course” page was approved by QSC through its standard process for substantive changes to the Quality Manual.
- Whether the amendment was disclosed to UCU as part of the ongoing governance discussions.
- Whether the description of the change as “corrections and clarifications” accurately reflects the substantive nature of what was introduced.

Consumer Protection and Transparency

The University has justified removing courses from UCAS on the basis of consumer protection, arguing that it would be misleading to advertise programmes that “may ultimately not exist,” while also maintaining that “no final decisions have been made.” These positions are inconsistent. If no final decision has been made, the courses may still run. Removing them from UCAS does not protect applicants; it prevents them from applying to courses that remain under consideration.

Consumer protection guidance requires clear and timely information. A transparent approach would have been to retain the courses with appropriate caveats. Instead they were removed.

This concern is compounded by inaccurate public communication. The University stated that courses would be withdrawn on 10 November but removed them on 7 November without correction. Whether this reflects error or intent, it undermines the claim that these actions were driven by transparency and compliance.

OfS Regulatory Dimension

The OfS framework is relevant independently of the internal Quality Manual question. The OfS requires registered providers to maintain adequate governance arrangements aligned with their own governing documents. A written acknowledgement of “managed exceptions” to a Quality Manual process, at the scale of 42 course suspensions, is at minimum a reportable governance risk.

The retrospective amendment of the Quality Manual compounds this risk. If the governing document was amended after the fact to justify conduct already taken and challenged, this raises questions about the integrity of the institution’s quality assurance framework that go beyond any individual procedural failure.

UCU considers that a referral or complaint to the OfS by affected students or the union is a credible escalation pathway if these governance concerns remain unaddressed.

Conclusions

The University has not identified a procedural basis that withstands scrutiny. The Outside Regulations procedure was applied to an institutional decision for which it was not designed, the endorsement requirement was admittedly not followed, the student consultation exemption relied upon did not exist

at the time the decisions were taken, and the programme performance model has never been reviewed by any academic governance body.

The University's response is materially weak on the endorsement question, where its own written admission of "managed exceptions" undermines a procedural defence the Quality Manual does not support.

The University's response is entirely absent on the programme performance model, which is the most substantively significant argument and the one with the clearest implications for Senate's constitutional role and OfS regulatory compliance.

The University's reliance on the student consultation exemption is unsound: that provision did not exist in the Quality Manual at the time the suspensions were enacted. It was introduced in January 2026, while the governance dispute was live, and described in the changes log only as "corrections and clarifications." The retrospective amendment of a governing document to justify conduct already challenged raises serious questions about the integrity of the University's quality assurance framework, and these questions are independent of any individual procedural failure.

UCU requests that Council satisfy itself on four outstanding matters:

- Whether documentary evidence of school-level endorsement exists and, if not, whether the University accepts that Section 4.1 was not complied with at the time of the suspensions.
- Whether the programme performance model has been, or will be, reviewed by a qualified academic governance body before any final closure decisions are taken.
- Whether the January 2026 amendment to the "Closing or suspending a course" page was approved through QSC's standard process for substantive changes, was disclosed to UCU, and was accurately described as a correction or clarification.
- Whether the scale and nature of these governance departures constitute a reportable event under the University's OfS registration conditions.

Inconsistencies in SSR Decision-Making

Concerns extend beyond course suspensions. During SSR "deep dive" sessions, management stated that methodology was not yet finalised. At the same time, Pro-Vice-Chancellors were requesting staffing reductions based on SSR targets.

This presents a clear inconsistency. Either decisions were being taken using an unfinished methodology, or central assurances did not reflect actual practice.

Further inconsistencies arose in claims that SSR proposals were developed "bottom up." Feedback from Heads of School indicates the opposite: targets were imposed centrally, with limited scope for meaningful input. This disconnect raises concerns about both transparency and the evidential basis of the proposals.

Legal Compliance with Public Sector Equality Duty

Under the Public Sector Equality Duty, the university has a legal obligation to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination
- Advance equality of opportunity
- Foster good relationships between people who share and do not share a protected characteristic.

When making and implementing decisions, such as the decision to approve/not approve the draft business case, council needs to understand the following to ensure legal compliance (taken from UK Government webpages):

> ***3. Are you clear about the decision's impacts by reference to the equality aims?***
>
> *Decision-makers must consider what information they have and what further information may be needed to give proper consideration. The duty asks decision-makers to stop and check the evidence. In equality terms, can you confidently describe the people affected by your decision? Do you know what they think about the subject? Is there data on the demographics of people impacted by your policies or practices? If not, do you know how to get it? Do not forget to assess the equality impact on the people who may have to implement your decision, such as staff or suppliers. Consider all the relevant protected characteristics. It is good practice to make a record that "due regard" was had against the statutory criteria, which will be useful in the event of any legal challenge or regulatory scrutiny.*
>
> ***3.1. If you are not clear about the decision's impacts***
>
> *You need to consider what information you have and what further information may be needed to give proper consideration. In deciding whether to gather more information, consider proportion and relevance. It is not sufficient to say "we do not have the evidence", you should identify gaps in the evidence and fill them in a proportionate and balanced manner (UK Government, 2026).*

Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) for the FN2 Business Case are therefore not optional extras. They are a legal requirement under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), and need to be robustly in place for council to make an informed decision as to whether or not to approve the business case.

Our local tracking of EIA compliance reveals a deeply concerning pattern :

- Major structural changes - including increases in student-staff ratios, reductions in research time, and cuts to services - are being presented in the Business Case to Council on 6 May with *no completed EIAs.*

- Where EIAs do exist (for example, course suspensions - the only one UCU has seen to date), they are *partial and limited,* focusing narrowly on students while ignoring impacts on staff.
- In some cases, decisions (journal access; office cleaning) have already been made and implemented *months before any EIA is completed,* raising serious questions about whether equality considerations are being meaningfully applied at all.

This is not a technical oversight. It is a systemic failure.

When EIAs are missing or inadequate, the university is not meeting the PSED. The consequences are not abstract.

- Increasing student-staff ratios disproportionately affects staff with disabilities, caring responsibilities, and those already managing high workloads.
- Reductions in research time may deepen existing inequalities in promotion and progression, particularly for women and marginalised staff.
- Cuts to services (like libraries, transport, and cleaning) can have uneven impacts across different groups, including disabled staff and students.

Without proper EIAs, these impacts remain invisible - and therefore unchallenged.

The Problem of 'Tick-Box' Equality

Even where EIAs are produced, there is a major concern that they function as a tick-box exercise rather than a meaningful process.

A basic or retrospective EIA - especially one that only considers a subset of those affected - does not meet the standard of 'due regard.' Equality must be considered *before* decisions are made, not after they are implemented.

What we are seeing instead with the Future Nottingham plans and no doubt the Business Case is a hollowing out of equality processes:

- EIAs completed late (or not at all)
- Narrow framing of who counts (students but not staff)
- Lack of evidence or engagement with unions and affected groups

This undermines both the spirit and the letter of the law, and is a serious, legal concern for Council members. Without coherent, robust and cumulative EIAs included within the Business Case, any decision to approve it is at risk of being unlawful in relation to the Equality Act 2010.

Overall Conclusions

Taken together, these issues point to a consistent pattern: compliance is asserted, but not clearly demonstrated. Established procedures have been bypassed, communications have been inconsistent, and decision-making—particularly around SSR—lacks transparency.

These are not technical concerns. They go directly to the credibility of the case being presented to Council. If the processes underpinning these proposals are unreliable, the risks attached to them are significantly increased.

There are also potential financial and legal consequences. Failure to follow established procedures—particularly where they relate to consultation, governance, and documented endorsement—may expose the University to challenge. In the context of staff restructuring, this could translate into increased costs through disputes, delays, or the need to offer enhanced severance terms to mitigate legal risk. What may appear as short-term efficiency gains could therefore generate additional unplanned expenditure.

Council is therefore asked to consider not only the proposals themselves, but the robustness of the processes used to develop them.