

Editorial: A fundamental threat to our field

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When we write Editorials, we like to focus on the positives: particularly developments in our field, to which you and we are contributing; exciting plans; provocations designed to stimulate and inspire.

Sometimes, however, we must focus on the negatives.

Sadly, this issue's Editorial is one of those times. In October 2021 a cohort of students started the part-time Master's in Railway Studies programme at the University of York. They will be the last to have the chance to follow this innovative course. For reasons that are hard to understand and in the face of protest from an international community of interested parties, in February 2022 the University took the decision to end this long-established and, by every conventional marker, successful programme.

The loss of any teaching programme in our field must be something of great concern. The field depends upon movement – an irony not lost on us. We need the next generations of scholars to come through if the field is to be sustainable. Without formal taught programmes like the Master's in Railway Studies, how will scholars emerge?

The University of York has offered Railway Studies programmes since 1995. The current Master's programme, started eight years ago as an online, distance-learning course, has always been oversubscribed. It offers an intellectually rigorous approach to railway history – but with the added breadth that the term 'railway studies' permits, engaging with other disciplines and increasingly the current rail industry. Students also benefitted from the relationship with the nearby National Railway Museum (NRM), including access to archival material and to curatorial expertise, and the annual residential weekend.

All of these factors are the sorts of things that the UK Government has (rightly or wrongly) pushed universities into chasing. Any other department or centre within a UK university

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would be falling over itself to do the kinds of things that the Master's in Railway Studies has been doing, and to achieve the kind of reach and impact the course has.

Despite this, the University of York has decided the course no longer fits with its strategic direction. To see this failure of vision as disappointing is to put it mildly. The University appears not to have appreciated or understood the value of the course, and to have taken the decision to close it on grounds which are difficult to justify in a meaningful way.

Particularly disappointing was the University's failure to engage with the expressions of concern submitted during the (unannounced) period the closure was being considered. Many from within our field – including this Journal – and in allied fields beyond transport and mobility history wrote to York's senior management with pertinent questions about the rumoured closure. Not only that, but there was widespread support for the course from outside the academic world – notably including the current rail industry. The University responded with generic replies, failing to address the questions asked or to provide a compelling rationale for the closure. The 'reassurance' that the University remains committed to the area sadly rings very hollow – without dedicated staff and taught provision it is hard to see the evidence to support that assertion of commitment.

So what are we losing?

Importantly, from the outset the course did not teach *just* railway history; it took a much broader approach, recognising the importance of transport history and placing railway pasts in their widest context. Course staff and former students have played, and continue to play, key roles in this Journal and others in allied fields. They have been significant contributors to the development of mobility history and the scholarly body in our field, the International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility.

Past students have produced outstanding research dissertations, and some subsequently progressed to PhD study, a potential feeder into our field. The teaching is and was of the highest quality, with students consistently highly satisfied; the external examiners (who act as 'quality control' within the UK Higher Education context) annually have commended the course. Since 1995, research produced by students, former students, and staff has provided life-blood for our field.

Certainly within the UK, but arguably internationally, having an institutional 'home' for a course that foregrounds railway, transport and mobility history is vital. It provides visibility for our field, and demonstrates an appreciation of the seriousness with which our field should be approached.

For a specialised and therefore relatively small course – currently it is delivered by a single academic (being made redundant by the closure), with support as needed from colleagues elsewhere in the University – the Master's in Railway Studies had a big impact. It has been more than 'cost-effective'. With appropriate backing from within the University, the course might have done even more – there was vast potential for expansion, including further PhD study and for building deeper connections with the NRM and the current industry.

We deeply regret the decision that the University of York has taken to close the Master's in Railway Studies course, and view it as a retrograde move. It is a move

that will have harmful effects upon potential students who would have undertaken the course, as well as on the strength, health and vitality of our field. The closure alerts us to the importance of our teaching programmes and our institutional presence. It also forces us to consider the most pressing question of all: how do we ensure the long-term viability of our field?

In the UK this closure is part of a worrying trend of closures emerging over the last few years and which adversely affects specialised degree programmes. As in our field, these specialised programmes are often very important to their respective fields. Whilst it is now too late for the Railway Studies programme at York, there are two implications we highlight.


Firstly, there may yet be further closures threatened elsewhere, whether directly related to our field or in other areas. We *might* be able to influence these. If you are able to protest closures in some format, can you do so?

Secondly, what can we salvage from the York programme? We need to consider how and where transport and mobility history is included in wider degree programmes – as well as fight for the provision of specialised courses like the Master’s in Railway Studies.

We would also suggest that whilst the University of York has shown it is missing an opportunity here, other institutions might not be so short-sighted. Given the demand for the course, its potential when given sufficient space and support to develop, and its importance, it would come as no surprise if another institution, with greater vision, were to adopt the programme.

For now, though, we know only that the pioneering teaching of railway history and railway studies at the University of York will be ended. We hope this will be the last closure that affects our field – but if more are threatened, we must rally around.

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