

## **Open letter to Professor Jane Norman, Vice-Chancellor, and Members of University Council**

**From:** Staff, students, alumni, and concerned members of the public

**Date:** 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2025

**To be delivered to:** Professor Jane Norman (jane.norman@nottingham.ac.uk), Chair and members of University Council, and copied to senior officers.

**Re: Proposed suspension/closure of undergraduate courses in Plant Biology, Agriculture, Microbiology and Food Science — urgent request to pause, consult and reassess**

Dear Professor Norman and Members of Council,

We write as staff, students, alumni and concerned citizens who believe the proposals contained in Phase 2 of *Future Nottingham* — specifically the suspension and proposed closure of the below degree programmes for 2026/27 — represent a serious, avoidable threat to the University's public mission and to the UK's national capacity to deliver on our international obligations, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The courses we refer to are:

- BSc Plant Biology & MSc Plant Biology
- BSc Agriculture & BSc Agricultural Business Management
- BSc Food Science & Nutrition
- BSc Microbiology
- MSc/PGDip Animal Nutrition

These suspensions were announced to staff last Wednesday and are proposed to be put to the University Council on **25<sup>th</sup> November 2025**. The pace and lack of prior consultation mean there is insufficient time for proper academic, social, and sectoral scrutiny — or for the University to understand the broader national consequences of these actions.

### **Why This Matters — Beyond Internal Budgeting**

#### **1. These programmes are public goods, not discretionary extras.**

Plant biology, agriculture, food science, and microbiology are foundational to food security, public health, biodiversity conservation, and climate adaptation. Removing or fragmenting these courses narrows the UK's pipeline of specialists required to meet national and global obligations under the UN Sustainable Development Goals (notably SDG 2 — Zero Hunger; SDG 13 — Climate Action; SDG 15 — Life on Land).

A university choosing courses purely on short-term market metrics — cohort size, tariff, or annual revenue — treats strategic national priorities as if they were retail products. Public universities have a civic duty to steward critical disciplines even when enrolment fluctuates. The University's *Future Nottingham* investments — including an £80 million campus development and substantial consultancy expenditure — show it can sustain provision in strategic areas. If sustainability and climate resilience are pillars of the University's vision, then removing the very programmes that generate the expertise to achieve them is contradictory.

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## **2. Sustainability performance and reputation are at stake.**

Sustainability rankings such as the **Times Higher Education Impact Rankings** now assess universities on progress toward the UN SDGs. These metrics influence global standing, student recruitment, research funding, and partnership opportunities. Nottingham currently performs strongly in these rankings — due in part to its teaching and research in agriculture, food, and plant biology. Eliminating courses that directly contribute to SDG 2, 13, and 15 will inevitably diminish the University's sustainability credentials and compromise its ability to evidence genuine impact in these areas. No amount of branding or new infrastructure can offset the reputational and ranking damage caused by dismantling core sustainability disciplines.

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## **3. We are already short of the skills the nation needs.**

Independent mapping of UK provision shows a thin supply of plant- and crop-science degrees compared with the demand for applied and scientific expertise in agriculture and horticulture, and an uneven training landscape at intermediate and advanced levels. Out of hundreds of courses offered nationally, only a small minority focus specifically on plant or crop science — a structural gap we cannot afford to deepen. Closing Nottingham's programmes would remove one of the country's strongest and most respected training routes into these essential professions.

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## **4. Nottingham's School of Biosciences is an engine of employability and national leadership.**

For decades, Sutton Bonington graduates have gone on to lead across agriculture, horticulture, plant biotechnology, food production and environmental management — sectors that underpin the UK's food security, biodiversity recovery and climate-change mitigation.

The School's graduates are consistently cited by employers for their applied skills, scientific literacy and field competence. Removing these degrees undermines one of the UK's most successful pipelines for producing professionals who translate science into practice, from farm management to sustainable food systems and conservation policy.

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## **5. The School of Biosciences is a major research asset.**

The School attracts substantial national and international research income in crop improvement, sustainable agriculture, food security, and climate-smart farming. This funding contributes not only to Nottingham's research profile but to the UK's capacity to deliver evidence-based solutions to the climate and nature crises. Curtailing undergraduate and postgraduate provision in these disciplines will weaken the research environment, reduce interdisciplinary collaboration, and erode the University's competitive advantage in areas directly aligned with government priorities such as net-zero agriculture and environmental sustainability.

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## **6. Volunteer and charitable initiatives cannot replace accredited degree training.**

Community-led efforts such as the Gatsby Plant Science Summer Schools, the Gatsby Plant Science Education Programme, and the Botanical University Challenge (BUC) provide invaluable enrichment for students, reconnecting them with plant science and inspiring future specialists. However, these

programmes run on limited charitable funding, depend on academic volunteers, and rely heavily on host universities for facilities and expertise. They were designed to complement, not replace, formal degree provision. Without robust university-level courses and staff expertise to anchor them, such initiatives cannot continue to plug the national skills gap in plant and food sciences.

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## **7. Student and staff welfare, and civic trust, are at stake.**

Students, prospective applicants, and staff deserve certainty and genuine consultation. The decision to suspend recruitment before Council approval, and the compressed timeline for engagement, restricts meaningful dialogue and erodes confidence in institutional governance. Staff and students are rightly mobilising to ensure the University does not trade short-term financial convenience for long-term reputational and societal loss.

## **We therefore call on the University to take the following immediate actions:**

### **1. Pause the suspension and remove these items from the Council agenda on 25 November 2025.**

This pause is essential to allow time for an evidence-based review and meaningful consultation with schools, staff, students, alumni, and external stakeholders. Proceeding without transparency will cause **significant reputational damage** to the University, undermining the legacy that Sutton Bonington has built as an agricultural powerhouse and damaging Nottingham's position in sustainability and subject-specific league tables.

A short delay now is far less costly than the long-term consequences of closing nationally strategic courses without sufficient scrutiny.

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### **2. Commit to transparency and publish the evidence behind the decision.**

The Vice-Chancellor's recent statement said these decisions "follow comprehensive assessments of market demand, student and employer needs, research income, and competitive positioning." If this analysis exists, it should be made public. We ask that the University release an accessible overview of this modelling — including the data on which it was based, the criteria used, and the evidence of consultation with employers and professional bodies.

We recognise that financial pressures must be managed responsibly. However, without transparency this process appears less like responsible stewardship and more like the beginning of a **land-use and resource-allocation exercise** that places short-term consolidation ahead of the University's civic and academic obligations.

Moreover, the decision appears inconsistent with multiple independent reports and white papers — including the Government's own findings on skills shortages in **agriculture, food production, environmental management and plant science**. These clearly show that demand for trained specialists is rising, not falling. Any claim that course closures align with "employer needs" must therefore be substantiated publicly.

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### 3. Explore constructive and forward-looking alternatives.

If plant and agriculture modules are to be repackaged into broader biological-science degrees, the University must commit to making these components **core and compulsory**, not optional. Without that assurance, these subjects will be gradually eroded and disappear entirely within a few years.

We urge the University to:

- Integrate **plant, crop and agricultural systems** teaching across all biological-science programmes;
- Expand modular pathways that retain specialisation in plant and food sciences;
- Pursue **cross-faculty partnerships** with industry, government, and research institutes for high-priority skills training; and
- Seek **targeted funding** through national strategic initiatives such as DEFRA's food-security programmes, UKRI's Net Zero Agriculture calls, and Green Careers pathways.

At the same time, national education policy is moving in the opposite direction to these closures. The introduction of the **Natural History GCSE** and the expansion of **Green Careers initiatives** (for example, through CIEEM and other professional bodies) aim to inspire young people to pursue environmental and plant-based sciences. Eliminating university-level routes in these areas will **break the educational pipeline** just as it is starting to recover — making the government's environmental education ambitions impossible to deliver.

### In closing:

Universities exist to serve the long-term public interest, not merely to balance termly accounts. The disciplines under threat are central to the University's civic mission and to national wellbeing. They underpin food security, climate resilience, and biodiversity recovery — priorities at the heart of both government policy and public concern.

Sutton Bonington's legacy of excellence in agricultural and plant sciences is internationally recognised. Its research attracts substantial grant income, drives innovation in sustainable farming and food systems, and trains the experts who will deliver the UK's commitments to climate adaptation and ecological restoration. To dismantle this strength now would be to weaken both the University and the nation it serves.

We would welcome the opportunity to work with the University of Nottingham — and with other higher-education institutions — to lobby government for dedicated financial support for strategically vital courses such as plant science, agriculture, and food systems. At a time when food security and environmental challenges pose genuine risks to economic and national security, these subjects should receive targeted funding and policy backing, just as the nation invests in training doctors, engineers, and nurses.

After all, every citizen depends on the expertise that grows our food, sustains our ecosystems, and protects the living systems that make life possible.

If Council proceeds without pause or consultation, the University risks not only the immediate loss of academic provision but the erosion of public trust, staff morale, and its own stated civic ambitions.

We urge the University to pause, publish, consult, and reframe these proposals so that short-term financial calculus does not hollow out the very expertise the University claims to value.

We stand ready to work constructively with the University to safeguard jobs, students, and the national interest — and to ensure that Nottingham continues its proud tradition as a leader in the sciences that sustain life itself.

**Yours sincerely,**

**Lead Signatories**

Dr Lauren Baker, The University of Oxford Botanic Garden and Arboretum

Dr Jonathan Mitchley, The University of Reading

Dr Hannah Hall, The University of Reading

Mr Sebastian Stroud, The University of Leeds

Dr Alastair Culham, The University of Reading

Dr Sven Batke, Edge Hill University

Dr Meriel Jones, University of Liverpool, retired

Professor John Warren, University of Aberystwyth, retired

The final list of all signatories gathered using Microsoft Forms to ensure full data protection and GDPR compliance will be sent to you on Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> November, in advance of the council meeting scheduled on for the 25<sup>th</sup>.

Although separate to our own petition, we also draw the VC's attention to all those who have signed the following public petitions:

Plant Sciences: <https://c.org/d8PQr9Rd9Z>

Food science - <https://c.org/Tp7gQBgYwD>

Agriculture - <https://c.org/CDkdk95LxZ>

Microbiology - <https://c.org/YXLh57RZyy>