# Crisis or opportunity? Universities, teaching mathematics, and the mathematical community

The crisis has revealed something we already suspected: that we are not essential workers. This has two sides: on the one hand, our mathematical activities are not necessary for the basic functions of civilized society; on the other hand, our material circumstances are safer and much more comfortable than those of nurses, sanitation workers, transport workers, food handlers, and so on. What we owe in exchange for our comfort is a serious reflection on the "essence" of our work. Since time is limited I will stick to the topic of this segment.

**Universities and teaching mathematics**

In the neoliberal model the university provides the service of enhancing the student's market value, and we, as teachers, are service workers. So we are not parasites, but the model of university education built on massive student debt is not sustainable, and other models are actively being discussed. The rich Ivy league and similar universities have already announced hiring freezes; Johns Hopkins has gone even further, sending signals that even tenure may not guarantee the expected level of material comfort for much longer.
The *Times Higher Education Supplement* has this headline story:

> **Mergers and 'FE future' predicted for some English universities**
>
> *While many universities would need "pretty big cuts in teaching and research staff" as a result of the coronavirus crisis, such action would not be enough to save some institutions, which would be forced to merge as a condition of receiving extra funding…*

Sir Steve Smith, vice-chancellor of the University of Exeter, adds

*"The future prosperity of the UK depends on having a strong university research base, which is subsidised by international student income."*

Lurking in the background in this and similar articles is the prospect that the existing system of higher education will be replaced by one where universities become content providers to fit the respective business models of leading national industries — Silicon Valley in the US, for example — and a market for the educational technology industry, whose interests don't necessarily align with ours.

**The mathematical community**

Some of the initiatives to preserve what we see as the values embodied by universities focus on protecting the most precarious university workers, and I would argue that they should be seen as an integral part of the community. I am one of 2800 signatories of the *Covid-19 Academic Solidarity Statement*, which

*calls on universities to protect the lives and livelihoods of its contingent academic workers, including non-tenure track (NTT) teachers and graduate students. … Signatories to the statement further pledge not to accept speaking invitations during the 2020-21 academic year at institutions that have extended tenure clocks for their tenure-track faculty, but have not similarly extended contracts for all currently employed NTT teachers and graduate students.*

Beyond that, I would say that this crisis provides the opportunity, such as it is, to ask what we mean by the mathematical community, whether it is indeed a community defined by common interests or whether, like most associations of human beings, it is not an uneasy expression of contradictory interests; and then to understand whether these can be reconciled or whether choices have to be made, in line with our visions` of not returning to the "old normal."