

'Madness' - Ulster University faces backlash after threatened closure of CAIN archive at Magee

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Ulster University's threatened closure of the CAIN archive at its Magee campus in Derry has attracted widespread criticism from academics, Troubles' victims and legacy groups who value the website's historic significance.

A consultation is now underway regarding the future of the CAIN archive in Derry and the public have been urged to make their voices heard.

The resource is described by Ulster University itself as being expertly curated by a team of two full-time researchers and an ICT officer and has been freely available online since March 1997.

The website contains a large archive of materials and information related to the conflict and politics in Northern Ireland, with new materials added on a regular basis. It is seen as a unique academic and civic resource.

However, last week Ulster University confirmed to the Derry News that CAIN has become financially unsustainable and is therefore under threat of closure. "A two-year period was agreed in 2016 to enable the CAIN archive to improve its financial viability and become self-funding.

"Despite some successful funding applications, regrettably these have not been enough and the project remains unsustainable in its current form," a UU spokesperson added.

People Before Profit's Eamonn McCann said it was a move that "contradicts" UU's public proclamations of expansion and growth.

Following publication of the story, academics, researchers, legacy groups, journalists, as well as current and past students, have expressed outrage regarding CAIN's proposed closure.

Peter Heathwood is uniquely placed to



The Magee campus of the University of Ulster in Derry.

comment on the future of the CAIN resource being both a victim of the Troubles and someone who contributed vast amounts of material to the website.

He was shot by loyalist paramilitaries in North Belfast on 27 September, 1979, in a case of mistaken identity. His father arrived on the scene and due to the shock of the incident had a heart attack and sadly died.

The trained history teacher and successful insurance salesman was paralysed in the attack and has since been confined to a wheelchair. In the absence of disability discrimination laws at the time, Mr Heathwood was politely told his services were no longer required and like many other injured victims of the Troubles received derisory compensation for what were life-changing injuries.

When he left hospital in 1980 the VCR had just been invented and he thought it was "fantastic" being able to record news bulletins and other footage to document The Troubles.

He said: "I thought if this could be put into university's then young leaders

of the future would see the futility of violence. Nobody wins, the suffering is across the board."

He said he hoped that by archiving this footage and allowing future generations to access it that it may prevent the cycle of violence from being repeated. "The saying goes, 'those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it,'" he added.

After seeing an advertisement in the Irish News around 1997 he met with Director of CAIN, Martin Melaugh, and has been contributing ever since.

He explained people living in countries around the world often get in touch with him looking to know the story of their grandparents.

"That's across the board, from soldiers, policemen and civilians. They ask me to send the news report of the funeral and so on.

"There wouldn't be two days go by without someone emailing me, and that includes people from as far away as America, Australia and China.

"I lost my own father the night I was shot, and one of the things that upset

me was that I never got to attend his funeral. So, I really do have empathy for people who come to me and say, 'would you have a news report on the funeral of my grandfather, my father, my uncle or whomever.'

"To get closure sometimes you need to see all that."

If the UU board proceeds with its proposal to lay off the three members of staff who keep the site functioning day to day, it will mean that when the site has a problem no one is there to fix it, "so CAIN will literally wither on the vine," Mr Heathwood added.

The Peace and Conflict Studies course, which is linked to CAIN, was moved from Magee to Jordanstown in Belfast a number of years ago. In recent years the Magee campus has lost other courses including Irish History and Politics, Irish Language and Literature and Psychology to other UU campuses.

It is understood that a typist employed by CAIN was let go a number of years ago which has already led to issues in terms of updating the site.

Paul O'Connor, of the Pat Finucane Centre in Derry, a human rights advocacy and lobbying entity named in honour of the murdered solicitor by the same name, believes it is yet another example of Magee being downsized rather than expanded.

He said: "The very idea that CAIN could be closed is an act of academic vandalism. Magee has been systematically stripped of courses, resources and teaching posts. CAIN is an internationally recognised conflict-based resource. This is madness.

"Would an institution led by people based in Derry instead of Belfast do a better job? Probably."

Eamonn Baker, whose work with Towards Understanding and Healing at Holywell Trust in Derry is centred around community relations and peace building, questioned the social cost of what

appears to be a cost-saving exercise.

He said: "The CAIN website is the most comprehensive source of information on 'the Troubles' and politics in Northern Ireland from 1968 to the present and it is continually updated and expanded. It is invaluable for fact checking in these days of fake news and contrived historical revisionism. So why would the Ulster University even consider pulling the plug on this magnificent resource

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so diligently curated by Martin Melaugh and his colleagues? And assuming UU does go on to pull the plug will the CAIN resource simply wither away without a watchful eye, a guiding hand? Who at all would benefit from such a debacle?"

The public can voice their views as part of the consultation by contacting kak.lasslett@ulster.ac.uk, Head of the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, and Dr Martin Melaugh m.melaugh@ulster.ac.uk