

The Open University branch of UCU
www.ucu.open.ac.uk

The Spark, special March 2014



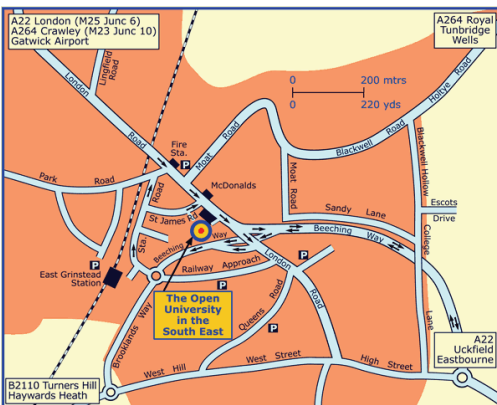
East Grinstead closure

The recent announcement that the East Grinstead Regional Centre will close by the end of December 2014 has sent shock waves throughout the Open University and has provoked an angry response from colleagues in MK and throughout regions and nations. As staff in East Grinstead struggle to come to terms with the decision and the impact on them personally, they have never lost sight of the impact this decision will have on the potential loss of the skills, expertise and dedication that has taken years to build and what that means for the University, ALs and students. The wider implications of the proposed locations analysis of the English Regions, with no guarantee of their existence beyond the next two years, has also created uncertainty and led to low staff morale.

UCU was not consulted before the decision to close the East Grinstead Regional Centre was made. We are opposed to the closure and have clearly stated that this decision should be deferred pending an open and transparent analysis of the English regions. If the 2010 locations review found it strategically important to keep East Grinstead open then what, after substantial investment and the hard work of dedicated staff to ensure that three SSTs (student support teams) were successfully embedded, has changed? Findings from the previous review, carried out by external consultants, found that regional structures were a valuable local presence, effective in their delivery of quality teaching and services. The wholesale dismantling of these structures was not an option then, it is not an option now.

It is vital that we vigorously campaign for the retention of regional structures and the local knowledge, expertise and dedication which ensures effective delivery of the necessary support for both students and ALs in the delivery of the academic strategy of the university. UCU is leading this campaign in collaboration with UNISON to defend members' jobs and to retain local resources and services in the South East Region and throughout other English regions to ensure we continue to provide quality education and support for students.

Pauline Collins, Branch President



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Arts faculty meeting votes overwhelmingly to support Senate motion

All Arts Faculty staff (not just full members of the Faculty Committee) were invited to a meeting on 26th March 2014. There were 55 present in person, plus 19 by video from the regions (discouraged from attending in person) and two by phone. All but one supported the motion to Senate after a very animated discussion (see below). As well as central and regional academic staff, there were admin and support staff at this meeting who all voted for the motion.

Amongst the highlights of the discussion were:-

- Serious concerns that VCE is overriding governance procedures under guise of operational and financial imperatives.
- Concern about excluding faculties from decisions (East Grinstead closure) and from consultation about strategies (reviewing regional locations) that affect module delivery, management of ALs, support of students.
- Lack of transparency in the way the decision was made and communicated; swearing Deans about a month or more ago and those at Council meeting (held 11th March) to secrecy about the closure;
- No business plan, no costings made available and certainly no consultation with stakeholders - if axing of SE location was driven by high cost accommodation alternatives, why were R13 staff given commitment that new premises would be found in November 2013 - what happened in the intervening four months?
- Why were 100s of thousands spent on reducing floor space in R13 offices during the summer of 2013 and then only a two year lease renewal offered to the landlord by Estates? (if the closure of R13 was not planned then why close it before the analysis of regional centres has taken place?)
- The comment was made that the VC's salary increase would cover any higher rental for a new local base.
- Questions were asked about how the regional work, especially that of AL services, would be distributed when AL services is not aligned to the SSTs, and also about how Staff Tutors would manage ALs without a local office base.
- Real concerns were expressed about the loss of local knowledge and local visibility of the OU as a university needing partnerships, consortia and collaborative projects.
- It is time to question major strategies put into place by the VC and VCE especially the huge fee hike and the "very expensive" (quote from Keith Zimmerman) implementation of the SSTs.

PostScript – Staff Tutor meeting

Sixteen members of the Staff Tutor Liaison Group met on 27th March and they unanimously endorsed the motion to Senate after the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) gave an explanation for the closure. He stated that Keith Zimmermann had been charged by the VC to do an analysis of all regional offices bar those located in UK capitals. This will be presented to Martin Bean in January 2015 and we got no sense it would include consultation.

UCU member at East Grinstead

Emergency Senate motion— OU Senate meeting, 2 April

Emergency Senate motion

- A. affirms the vital continuing work of staff in English regional locations in supporting students and ALs and delivering the academic strategy of the Open University;
- B. agrees that a review of specific functions and locations is timely, and looks forward to taking a full part in this review and to receiving and deciding on its recommendations;
- C. deplores the lack of consideration for valued colleagues and for the continuity of support for students apparent in the abrupt decision to close region 13, and urges that means be found to keep the East Grinstead office open pending the outcomes of the review.



Closure of East Grinstead regional office

When Keith Zimmerman, the OU's new Director, Students, in post since October 2013, announced the closure of the East Grinstead office at a hastily convened R13 staff meeting on 13th March, everyone present was shocked, and people were angry and distressed. They were shocked not just because they've been doing a great job (as management very recently told them), but because in November 2013 the OU gave assurance that the Region 13 centre would stay in its office or move to somewhere else in East Grinstead.

Moreover, the OU have just revamped the entire East Grinstead office and set up the Arts, CACP and IET Student Support Teams (SST) hubs there.

The OU declared that the closure was because of the ending of the lease arrangement, additional rental and refit costs. This is patently not the case. If refit cost was an issue why have they just refitted out the existing offices (a refit which will now end up in a skip)? If rent was an issue why did they not agree to the five year lease requested in order to keep the rental costs down (the OU only offered 2 years)? Can cost be the issue when the closure costs will far exceed any change in rent and the OU is planning to move services into the London office – a place with the most expensive real-estate, housing and cost of living in the world?

We are within our rights to also ask why senior management neglected the findings, in the November 2010 report on regions overseen by Will Swann, (Director, Students at the time), which concluded regions were a valuable local face of the OU and fulfilled the task of delivering our teaching *more cheaply* than a model of reduced localities. The closure has nothing to do with landlords or rents or leases or re-fit costs. The lease may have occasioned the closure announcement but it's certainly not the cause.

In the East Grinstead closure announcement the OU also declared that it is undertaking an analysis of all the English Regional offices. As the closure statement said "*..the University needs to operate in the four political jurisdictions of the UK, meaning a presence is required in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, alongside our Milton Keynes Headquarters*", all the other Regional offices are clearly under imminent threat. The analysis will present its findings to the VCE in January 2015.

In closing down the East Grinstead office the OU will lose any local presence and all the local knowledge and expertise it needs to offer its students, ALs, Faculty Managers and Staff Tutors. It sends out a message that the OU is content, despite quadrupling fees, to reduce the support and services it provides to the South East's students and ALs. As a consequence, the OU will haemorrhage even more students as it looks less and less like a University which offers quality courses backed up by equally vital quality support.

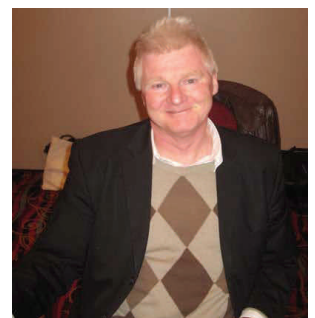
In Region 13 the OU has put four options on the table: relocation, redeployment, early retirement and voluntary severance.

The University stated that it is hopeful there will be no compulsory redundancies, though this begs the meaning of the word "compulsory". In a series of meetings held with HR and Assistant Deans from the Faculties it appears that the Faculty staff have been offered relocation to Camden. However staff based in Camden tell us there is no room to accommodate the 20 FMs and Staff Tutors in Camden, but that is where the OU intends they should go. This throws up huge problems – none the least that all of the agreements to support relocation are time limited and inadequate, and do not take account of the lack of support, facilities, role changes, the difficulties of doing the job and a long commute etc. Although Faculty staff have been asked to consider relocation the fate of the Learner Support and AL services team and all the other admin and secretarial support staff has not been divulged.

A Task Force Team headed by Barbara Stephens is to oversee the proposed closure of Region 13. So far the responses by staff and the unions include the following:-

- The OU UCU Executive met on 21st March to agree the union's strategic response and co-ordinated campaigning strategy in opposition to the closure of East Grinstead and to ensure an open and transparent analysis of the English Regions in defence of jobs and services.
- The office staff at East Grinstead met on the 26th March to set up a small committee to offer support for all those affected and to look for ways to oppose the closure.
- The Arts Faculty met in an Extraordinary session on the 26th March and wholeheartedly supported a motion (unanimous bar 1) going to Senate on 2nd April demanding the East Grinstead office be retained.
- There has been widespread dismay and anger throughout the Milton Keynes campus and protests have been - and continue to be - made.
- Facebook and Twitter campaigns are about to burst onto the social media scene.
- A lobby/meeting of MPs in parliament has been proposed and MPs have been approached.
- Local and national press releases are being sent out.
- A 38 Degrees petition opposing the closure is being devised.

John James, AL Rep for East Grinstead



Email to Academic members—30 replies so far

I'm sending this message to all UCU academic members of staff in the regions and nations as the UCU Staff Officer for regional/national academic staff. I am not the Central Academic Staff Officer but have taken the liberty of sending this to all central academic UCU members as well.

The closure decision has caused shock and anger because of the manner in which it was done and for the consequences for R13 staff and students. The simultaneous announcement of a review of all the regional offices is also extremely ominous. Pauline Collins and other local union reps are working around the clock at the moment trying to represent and support R13 members faced with the immediate impact of this on their jobs and livelihoods, as well coordinating a wider campaign to oppose this closure.

In case you haven't heard yet, Matt Staples (UCU Rep for the OU in London) has now confirmed that an emergency motion has been accepted for Senate that:

- A. affirms the vital continuing work of staff in English regional locations in supporting students and ALs and delivering the academic strategy of the Open University;
- B. agrees that a review of specific functions and locations is timely, and looks forward to taking a full part in this review and to receiving and deciding on its recommendations;
- C. deplores the lack of consideration for valued colleagues and for the continuity of support for students apparent in the abrupt decision to close region 13, and urges that means be found to keep the East Grinstead office open pending the outcomes of the review.

Like many of you I'm sure, I have seen lots of emails from colleagues right across the university about the adverse implications of this decision for our university, staff and students alike. I am contacting you now as I would like to pull this reaction together, canvass your views and ask for ideas for what else should be done. Whilst appreciating that academic faculty staff in R13 are - in the short term at least - less affected than other staff in R13 in terms of job security, without an office base this is still a very unsettling time for the R13 faculty staff - and indeed for all regional faculty staff following the announced review.

I will be at a scheduled JNC meeting (between our Exec JNC team, university senior management & HR) on 27th March with Pauline and would like to collate as many arguments, opinions and suggestions as possible please. It will also take the pressure off Pauline's email box as she simply hasn't the time to reply to everyone at the moment.

I don't think we should be under any illusion that this decision and review have huge implications for the future of the university and yet **was taken with little or no academic input** - my understanding is that the Deans weren't consulted and it was presented to them as a fait accompli.

In my opinion it would be a further insult to our R13 colleagues if the VCE (who took this decision) thought that there was any perceived ambivalence or lack of opposition to this from academic staff, so please do make your voice heard whenever and wherever you can.

The senate motion is very relevant now in this regard.

Philip O'Sullivan, Social Sciences Staff Tutor in Belfast



East Grinstead Project implementation website

The OU has launched an East Grinstead Project implementation website with detailed information and a set of Frequently asked questions: <http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/projects/east-grinstead-project-implementation>.

The sums just don't add up - a member's view

The OU is in good financial health

The number of OU senior managers, those earning £100,000 a year, has risen considerably. Up from 16 to 19 between 2012 and 2013. The Vice Chancellor, as everyone knows, received a huge 11% pay rise taking his earnings from £367,000 in 2012 to £407,000 in 2014 (is this why he needs a £45,000 a year speechwriter?)

More importantly, although reading Company Financial statements can be a bit like reading runes or poking about in intestines, it's absolutely clear the OU is a very rich and commercially successful organisation.

Is the OU 'doing well' in commercial terms?

Unquestionably yes! In this last financial year OU surplus amounted to 4.2% of its current 5% target of surplus to income. Up to 2009-10 this OU target was generally 2%.

For comparison, this level of profit puts the OU on a par with the UK's major Energy companies (who are alleged to be engaged in egregious profiteering). The OU's reserves etc. are on a par with the liquidity of many UK banks which by 2015-18 are supposed to hold 4.5% of common equity and retained earnings - rising to 7% 'in good times'.

How well is the OU doing in comparison with other Universities?

Very well indeed in financial terms. I'm not sure the same terms are used in each of these university statements (a group chosen at random) but, nevertheless, the table below gives a basis for reasonable comparison. On this basis the OU is outstandingly successful; it also has very substantial reserves in hand and in longer term holdings.

Financial Statement Year to July 2013 some Highlights	2013 £m
Income	448
Expenditure	429
Surplus before tax	19
Assets fixed	154
Assets current	256
Reserves	272
Cash gilts/bank deposits	165
Cash	162
Income	
Funding bodies	198
Tuition fees/contracts	207
Other	25
Research	15
Endowments/investments	4
Full time staff costs	202
ALs staff costs	61
Others	8
Early Retirement/Voluntary Severance	4

University year to 2013	Income £m	Surplus £m (deficit)	University year to 2013	Income £m	Surplus £m
Exeter	280	(4)	London Met	127	0.8
Southampton	447	6	UCL	937	18
Cardiff	436	2	Cumbria	74	5
Durham	283	11	Bournemouth	120	0.2

But what about student numbers?

Aside from staff salaries which have remained fairly static, in the OU, the only numbers which have not risen are student numbers. They were 243,000 in 2012 and 206,000 in 2013. The FTEs were respectively 86,000 and 80,000. These are significant falls. We have to ask was the OU right to quadruple student fees and thereby risk the entire University?

Whatever the answer, and the OU surely needs to be debating this, the OU can afford to keep East Grinstead office open! Indeed, it could be greatly increasing its local presence and the support and services it offers its students in order to try and halt this decline in student numbers.

John James, AL Rep for East Grinstead



Letters to the Editor

Spark welcomes letters from branch members on any issues likely to be relevant to the branch. Please email your letter to ucu@open.ac.uk to appear in the next issue.

East Grinstead—is the lack of consultation lawful?

Dear Editor

In November 2013 we were given written assurances by senior management that:

The University is committed to maintaining offices within the South East in the event of the landlord not agreeing a lease extension and East Grinstead would be the first priority location to be considered if this does become an eventuality.



There was no forewarning of change until staff were told a decision had been taken to close the region. The union expects to be consulted before the University takes these types of decisions – we have not been consulted.

Is it lawful under the terms of UK legislation?

The law states that (taken from the Gov.uk, website):

If your employer is making 20 or more employees redundant at the same time, the consultation should take place between your employer and a representative (rep). This will either be:

- *a trade union rep (if you're represented by a trade union)*
- *an elected employee rep (if you're not represented by a trade union, or if your employer doesn't recognise your trade union)*

Collective consultations must cover:

- *ways to avoid redundancies*
- *the reasons for redundancies*
- *how to keep the number of dismissals to a minimum*
- *how to limit the effects for employees involved, e.g. by offering retraining.*

Your employer must also meet certain legal requirements for collective consultations.

In other words the UCU has a right to be informed BEFORE the event so that all the other options can be considered.

Penalties

Of course, the penalties are small for an organisation the size of the OU – but there are important principles at stake and, the OU should be under no doubt that we will use every available channel to pursue the matter.

We will also demand and we do expect to receive (we have a right to this information) all the details of the pre and post closure plans (who did what, where and when and what were the costings and what alternatives were considered and why were they rejected, and so forth).

Open and honest?

Important though it is, putting the law aside for a moment, in these circumstances we are entitled to ask is the OU being open and honest. Being open was not just about being open to people, places, methods and ideas. The OU used to pride itself on being a liberal, open and democratic institution where peoples' views and democratic debate were seen as valuable, indispensable assets.

Single minded to the point of blindness

This has changed under the watch of this Vice Chancellor and VCE. The mechanisms (Faculty meetings, Senate, AL Representation and OUSA) are still in place because statutes are difficult to change but this VCE has cohered power and it clearly sees such discussions as going through the motions.

The VCE is beginning to resemble a cabal where arbitrary decisions are taken in secret – and then presented to the rest of the OU. Policies are seen as boats on a choppy sea. They have a captain, single minded to the point of blindness, determined to get them to port no matter the difficulty.

The VCE no longer sees debate and discussion as essential parts of the Open University and unless this changes it will, to continue the metaphor, drive the OU onto the rocks. The way the VCE had behaved is not the way a responsible management behaves.

John James, AL Rep for East Grinstead



The Open University branch of UCU

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Web: www.ucu.open.ac.uk

Need help?

One of the most important services provided by UCU is support for individual members experiencing problems in their employment, or with other members of the University. If you want any advice on employment related problems, please email ucu@open.ac.uk. Any such emails will of course be treated in strict confidence.

UCU resources

The following resources are available for any member who wants one, please call into room 015, Wilson C block, Walton Hall and collect one or email ucu@open.ac.uk and we will send one to you—it all helps to raise awareness of the Union.

- Hessian bag
- Mug
- Lanyard—new OU branch ones just arrived!
- Pens
- Mouse mat
- Publicity posters



Branch meetings 2014

Future branch meeting dates are as follows and all members are welcome to attend—MS Lync online meeting links will be sent to all members with the Agenda.

Tues 29th April 2014 branch meeting at 12.30pm, Room B232, Wilson b block - Congress amendments
Tuesday 23rd September 2014 branch meeting at 12.30pm, Room B232, Wilson b block
Wednesday 19th November 2014 AGM at 12.30pm, Room B232, Wilson b block

Your Executive Committee 2013-14

President: Pauline Collins

Honorary Secretary: Lesley Kane

Honorary Treasurer: Stephen Pattinson

Vice Presidents: David Knowles and Meridian

Equality Officer: Costas Athanasopoulos

Central Academic Staff Officer: Jonathan Hughes

Central Academic-Related Staff Officer: Kate Servant

Regional/National Academic Staff Officer: Philip O’Sullivan

Regional/National Academic-Related Staff Officer: **vacancy**

Associate Lecturers Officer: Judy Ekins

Ordinary Members:

Jeni Aldridge
John Bennett
Chris Bollom
Eric Bowers
Gill Clough
Bruce Heil

David Houpt
Hilary Partridge
John Peters
Peter Piper
Nicolas van Labeke
Eric Wade

Photos of these people are on our branch website: www.ucu.open.ac.uk.

UCU National Exec Committee Members:

Pauline Collins, Lesley Kane and Roger Walters

Father of NUJ Chapel - vacancy