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The Spark - the newsletter of the Open University branch of the University and College Union (UCU).

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## The Spark - June 2015 Newsletter of the OU branch of the University and College Union

### The Cuts and the Front Line

Pauline Collins (Branch President) has been meeting regularly with Human Resources about the cost-cutting measures and their effects on staff numbers, workload and morale. UCU has been particularly concerned about allegations that some staff members have been 'tapped' for voluntary severance (VS) on personal grounds. We have also been contacted by individuals anxious to explore VS but advised that it is not open to them because they are not part of a targeted task group.

UCU would like to hear from members about their experience, any fixed-term contract problems and any workload implications Voluntary Severance may be causing for remaining staff. If you have issues to report, please contact [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) or telephone 01908 6(53069) in confidence.

### **Voluntary Severance is VOLUNTARY.**

In this issue you will find the following articles:

- [AL Contract: Negotiations update](#)
- [Regional Campaign and Locations Analysis](#)
- [Pay Negotiations: Joint National Claim 2015](#)

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- [Work-related Stress](#)
- [Branch survey of AL workload](#)
- [Report from National UCU Academic-Related meeting](#)
- [HMRC Tax rebates \(relief on UCU Subscriptions\)](#)
- [Update from the AL Working group](#)
- [The Open University Branch Slogan Competition](#)
- [OUBUCU Twitter Account](#)
- ["Proposed change to USS rules causes wealth transfers"](#)
- [New Exec members, reps and contacts](#)
- [Need help?](#)
- [Letters to the Editor](#)
- [Branch meetings 2015](#)



## AL Contract: Negotiations update

Negotiations on a new AL contract are progressing, a joint statement was posted on the intranet on 29 May 2015 and a more detailed union communication will be prepared in July.

<http://intranet.open.ac.uk/ouintra/story.aspx?id=28952>.

**STOP PRESS:** On Monday 15 June, ALs will have received an email inviting them to take part in an OU survey about the AL role review. There were links to the 2008 and the draft 2014 AL profiles, which are now on our [branch website](#).

We encourage members to respond to this survey, and also to feed any significant points you wish to make, back to the UCU branch at [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk). The deadline for completing the survey is **Friday 17th July 2015**.

The survey is at this address: <https://www.surveymonkey.com>

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## Regional Campaign and Locations Analysis

An official consultation closed 15th June. The UCU Regional Campaign group prepared guidance notes for members and made a formal response (see [branch website](#)). UCU continues to express concern about the approach taken to regional work and the resulting high-level recommendations.

<http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/strategy/ou-locations-analysis/>

UCU members are using 'Rosie' headscarves (see photos in this newsletter) to express support for building and strengthening the Regions. You can post a selfie and see the 'wall of support' here: [www.ucu.open.ac.uk/UCU/BuildOurRegions.html](http://www.ucu.open.ac.uk/UCU/BuildOurRegions.html).

(Please contact the [branch office](#) if you want a Rosie Headscarf.)



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## Pay Negotiations: Joint National Claim 2015

Members are being consulted on this year's national pay negotiations. Contact [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) if you have not received your personal email.

In the last 5 years members have experienced a "real-terms" cut of more than 14%. The national claim has been agreed by all 5 Higher Education trade unions and has been submitted to the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). The claim has two parts: pay level [www.ucu.org.uk/?mediaid=7180](http://www.ucu.org.uk/?mediaid=7180) and pay equality [www.ucu.org.uk/?mediaid=7181](http://www.ucu.org.uk/?mediaid=7181).

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Employers did not make a meaningful response to the Pay Equality Claim, and the proposal of 1% (raised only from 0.8%) does nothing to address the long-term decline in HE pay.

A Consultative Ballot of UCU members opened on 10th June and will close on Thursday 25th June 2015.

Please see the full story in the UCU HE News Bulletin:

[www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/k/d/ucu\\_henews39\\_apr15.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/k/d/ucu_henews39_apr15.pdf).



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## Work-related Stress

Workplace 'stress management standards' have been in place for 10 years, but there are concerns that workplace stress is rising and managers are failing to deal with this. This article explains the background and provides Trade Union Council resources to understand and implement the stress management standards.

[www.hazards.org/stress/distressingfailure.htm](http://www.hazards.org/stress/distressingfailure.htm).

For further information please contact: John Bamford, UCU Health & Safety Advisor: [jbamford@ucu.org.uk](mailto:jbamford@ucu.org.uk).

Please contact the UCU office if you have concerns about your workload: [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) or telephone 01908 6(53069).

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## Branch survey of AL workload

Unlike other staff ALs are not surveyed by the university about their working hours, so the recent survey conducted by UCU is therefore the

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our last issue of *the Spark* and since then our analysis has borne out these early results.

We received over 1000 responses, and produced data on AL working hours on over 100 modules. The median hours spent on tutoring a presentation were **154% of the hours ALs are paid for**. On Level 3 modules the median hours worked were higher than this, at **167% of the hours ALs are paid to work**. For a full-time employee, 154% is equivalent to being paid to work a 37-hour week, and actually working 57 hours, while 167% would be 61.8 hours.

Some of the extra work reported at Level 3 was providing individual student support, outside of tutorials, forums, and TMA marking. This may be because students find Level 3 modules demanding, and fewer tuition hours mean that students are less likely to bring their queries to a tutorial. This may have implications for the OU's academic strategy, as it suggests Level 3 students require considerable support.

The average time spent on a student's TMA script was between 1hr 30 minutes and 1 hour 40 minutes at Levels 1, 2 and 3 (with Level 3 at the higher end). Responses from Level 8 (eg masters level) tutors gave a similar picture to level 3, but with even more time spent on TMA scripts, the average being over 2 hours per script. TMA script marking is a major part of the job for all ALs, and one that the OU constantly underestimates.

It is worrying that ALs on some relatively new modules report doing more extra unpaid hours than on older modules. Reasons given include longer marking time for TMA scripts, support required for iCMAs and other forms of electronic delivery, and increased student expectations. We will be re-running the survey shortly for modules that are in their first presentation this year. Given the clear results of this survey, any changes that would increase AL workload without a corresponding increase in pay would be completely unacceptable.

The qualitative results of the survey are on the [branch website](#) and if any member wants to see the results for their module, please contact Lesley on [l.h.kane@open.ac.uk](mailto:l.h.kane@open.ac.uk).

**Lesley Kane, Hon. Secretary**



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## Report from National UCU Academic-Related meeting

The annual meeting of Academic-Related staff (who make up approximately 20% of UCU's members) took place on 11 March and was attended by 2 Reps from OU UCU.

The main themes were career and professional development and the use of contractors. There is also widespread concern in the sector about losing the title and status conferred by the 'academic-related' label where this is being replaced by the concept of 'Professional Support Staff'.

There was a presentation focusing on the importance of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). This was followed by a session sharing institutional experience and thinking about how to bargain to get meaningful CPD.

The OU allows time off for job-related training and personal development is part of the appraisal process, so it's a higher priority than at some other institutions. However, most institutions are bad at succession planning and the difference between professional development and training is becoming increasingly blurred. This means there is allowance made for courses seen as directly related to one's role but usually no allowance for personal development.

The meeting looked at UCU's website for CPD at <http://cpd.web.ucu.org.uk> and fed back that it needed to have a greater focus on academic-related issues. The website has downloadable guides on topics ranging from how to use social media effectively to time management. There are also guides for academics on conferences, mentoring, peer review, grant applications and CVs.

Our branch of UCU currently does not have a Learning Rep, **please get in touch if you are interested in taking on that role** [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) or 01908 6(53069).

**Jeni Aldridge, Exec Member & UCU rep in Marketing and Communications**

Union Learn information: <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/>

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## HMRC Tax rebates (relief on UCU Subscriptions)

If you have moved house, please remember to let HMRC tax office know your new address as employers are no longer required to inform HMRC of a change of address. This has come to light because one of our members discovered that a tax rebate cheque was sent to an address that was 18 years out of date.

**Please note that you can claim for four years' tax relief on your UCU subs.**

Further information: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/taxrelief>.

## Update from the AL Working group

Whilst we are seeking agreement on a new contract that would resolve many of the difficulties with the current module-based contract, we continue to negotiate to resolve difficulties within the current contract.

### Areas Where There Is Progress

The first is on the need for the OU to provide a communication tool for ALs to enable them to carry out their work and contact students effectively and cheaply, since the easiest way to contact some students is by texting but currently this requires ALs to use their personal mobile

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the university asks students whether they would like to be contacted by text. The University has stated it intends to roll out a solution to ALs using [Office 365](#) which will provide internet-based telephony and texting, marking a change from the refusal to offer MS Office licenses to ALs. The Working Group welcomes this development and looks forward to further detail.

The second is our wish to find a way of simplifying the transfer of ALs into successor modules without the need for undergoing increasingly onerous application and interview processes. Apparently there are pilots in preparation in two faculties and we hope to report further soon. (Of course, should a new contract be negotiated then such mechanisms will no longer be necessary.)

Concerns were raised that on some modules, ALs have been expected to travel to Milton Keynes and spend a day for module briefings and debriefings and yet only receive a half day's pay. It's now been agreed ALs should be paid appropriately for taking part in module briefings. The Group will be watching that this is communicated to faculties.

Proposals have been made on group size payments that can protect jobs when numbers of students may be low in a year—similar to what was implemented under the Interim Agreement. We believe that we are near agreement on this. Finally, we are seeking to ensure a mechanism for reviewing salary banding where there are significant concerns that workload is in excess of time paid for.

### **Areas Where We Have Not yet Been Able To Reach Agreement**

**1. Performance Improvement Plans for ALs** and the inclusion of these at an early stage in the redundancy criteria. We have pointed out that this does not apply to internal staff but we have failed to agree on a way forward.

**2. Changing presentation patterns.** We have been trying to reach a general agreement on the protection of jobs for the whole cohort of ALs teaching that module. Some faculties have done this, but HR is not prepared to issue general guidance. In the meantime we will continue to pursue this through the AL redundancy consultation meetings

**3. The use of consultancy contracts** for work like monitoring and module forum moderation. These are significant areas for some ALs and should be considered as mainstream pensionable work. There is a non-core contracts project underway. If such areas of work continue to be defined as non-core they will continue to come under non-pensionable consultancy contracts.

The UCU AL Working Group is: Judy Ekins (Branch ALs Officer), David Knowles (AL & Vice President), Bruce Heil (AL & Vice President), Lesley



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(AL rep) attend as observers.

## David Knowles and Bruce Heil, OU UCU Vice Presidents



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## The Open University Branch Slogan Competition

The winning slogan, intended to accompany the 'Rosie' UCU poster on some of our local publicity, was chosen by the Executive from 29 entries:

### **Our University, Our Voice**

There were many other favourites from 'Open and United' to 'Let's Build Some Union Muscle' and 'Feel the Power'.

Several members also told us that our offer of a John Lewis gift voucher was not appreciated because the department store chain has been 'anti-union' and 'made a negative contribution' to the independence debates in Scotland. The winner was therefore offered a choice of possible vouchers or cash, and we'll follow that policy in future. Members have also told us that while Rosie the Riveter is widely recognized, it's an old image based in a wartime era so they'd appreciate more modern and varied imagery in the UCU branding. Please do send any suggestions, which we'll be happy to pass to head office on your behalf.

Very many thanks to the members who took time to think up excellent slogans, which we still hope to use in future, and to write to us about the competition. The Recruitment and Organising Committee (ROC) is

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your ideas via [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk).

**#BuildOurRegions**

- Because they support and sustain our students
- Because they foster our local links
- Because they give the OU a national reach
- Because they are the heart of our community

**The OU English Regions are under threat!**

Show your support by tweeting your Rosie photo using the #buildourregions  
Email: [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) Tel: 01908 653069  
[www.ou.open.ac.uk/buildourregions](http://www.ou.open.ac.uk/buildourregions)

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## OUBUCU Twitter Account

If you are a Twitter user then please follow the branch account—the account name is **oubucu**. We currently have 251 followers and want to use this more to send out bulletins and generate debate. Someday we aspire to match the Leeds University branch of UCU, which has 1986 followers.

We also have a WordPress blog where some of the articles from previous issues of *the Spark* have been added – please have a look and you might like to leave us a comment!

<https://twitter.com/oubucu> Twitter account

<https://www.facebook.com/oubranch.ucu> Facebook account

<https://oubucu.wordpress.com/> OU branch of UCU blog

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## "Proposed change to USS rules causes wealth transfers"

A colleague in the Faculty of Business and Law has sent us a link to his

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section. *The Spark* will provide an update on the employers' consultation (which closed 22 May) in the next issue.

"The scheme proposed to replace the Universities Superannuation Scheme's (USS) final salary section ignores career progression and other salary increases. This will lead to substantial wealth transfers from current members of the final salary section to other USS members. Under the proposed rules, the option for final-salary members to receive a pension based on a future pensionable salary will be removed retroactively, which reduces the value of those members' accrued benefits." Please read more here: <http://www.henrylahr.com/?p=336>

**Dr Henry Lahr, Department of Accounting and Finance, Faculty of Business and Law**

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## New Exec members, reps and contacts

The branch is pleased to report that we have co-opted two new Ordinary Members to our Executive Committee: Gill Watt, CICP (from 12 March) and Shirley Northover, MCT (from 29 April 2015). In addition there are 4 new Reps/Publicity Contacts:

**Christina Anderson**, Student Services. As she works in the Frank Henshaw building she would like two other people willing to post notices in Joe Clinch and Philip Sully buildings.

**Jane Hughes** is the new UCU Rep in the Faculty of Business and Law following the retirement of Chris Bollom, who has our grateful thanks for his service.

**Sue Pearce and Theresa Nolan** are the new UCU Reps in FELS, taking over from Daniel Allington, whose past work was much appreciated.

You can find a full list of Officers, Exec Members and local UCU Contacts on the branch website:

<http://ucu.open.ac.uk/people>.

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### Need help?

One of the most important services provided by UCU is support for individual members experiencing problems in their employment. If you want advice on employment-related problems, please email [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk). Any such emails will of course be treated in strict confidence.

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There is also help of other kinds through the charity [Recourse](#) which gets some of its funding from UCU. Recourse provides access to confidential emotional and practical support via a helpline and advice centre for employees in Higher and Further Education.

**Helpline number: 0808 802 0304** (24 hours, 7 days per week)

### Letters to the Editor

**Spark welcomes letters from members and others on issues likely to be of interest to the branch. We reserve the right to edit for reasons of space but will check the final version with the author.**

Please email your letter to [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk).

Please see [http://ucu.open.ac.uk/the\\_spark](http://ucu.open.ac.uk/the_spark) for the editorial policy of *the Spark*.

### Reflections from a Staff Tutor

“When I take my voluntary severance at the end of July, I shall have plenty of time for reflection about my 23 years in the OU. The OU senior management’s strategy and its project culture gives precious little room for evaluation of change and how it has been implemented, but while I am still ‘inside the tent’ here are a few observations. For starters, perhaps the VCE would like to consider the hard facts that are emerging from the fall-out of the closure of the East Grinstead Regional Centre.

It is probably pointless to rehearse the waste of wonderful committed and experienced South-East support staff who found themselves out of work last Christmas or the costs of relocating over 20 Faculty staff to Camden office and the upheaval this caused (in spite of lovely London colleagues doing all they could to accommodate and welcome us). The move to Camden has prompted 11 Faculty colleagues (50%), myself included, from the SE region to opt for voluntary severance or the retirement package.

This is putting considerable pressure on Faculties and their

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Departments to improvise cover at great speed. Deans will undoubtedly be required to respond to ALs asking reasonable questions about their management and continuity of support. And yet, with no lessons learnt, the VCE will probably try to close more regional offices sooner or later. The current OU austerity agenda will undoubtedly be used to fuel the process, but this is a distraction from the real issue; the drop in student recruitment and retention.

Those of us at the coal face often comment that the OU senior management frequently fails to do joined-up thinking. Unfortunately I think that many of the current initiatives are connected, from the drive to online teaching and materials to the Student Support Teams, the new tuition strategy and of course the Locations Analysis—all feeding into a vision of a streamlined, call-centre based, virtual world of distance higher education. And in all this the fate of the faculty Staff Tutors hangs in the balance. We support our ALs' academic and pedagogical needs and understand the local educational and cultural environments they live and work in; these ALs are a key part of the OU's academic community. Like our students, they will not respond to remotely conceived and delivered 'management instructions'.

I urge colleagues to initiate a university-wide debate about the future of the OU—and not to be content with consultations where considered, informed views of faculties and regions are bound to be marginalised because they don't fit senior management models."

**Paula James, Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies, Arts Staff Tutor in the South East**



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## Cost savings: poor planning?

“My writing this is prompted by the fact that not all academic units are using the voluntary severance (VS) scheme as a way of achieving their cost reductions. My Faculty is one that is, and there are concerns that this is because steps haven't been taken in the last few years to save money even though everyone knew, and Faculty management would have been irresponsible not to know, that student numbers would be volatile in the first period of the new fee-loans. This is an experiment visited on the sector but with particularly unpredictable consequences for the OU.

All we have heard from the Dean and from the Senior Financial Administrator in the last few years is good news stories about student numbers even when it was evident this wasn't the case. Since 2012 replacement and new staff have been appointed, for example (whereas other Faculties have not replaced staff and therefore have savings already in their pockets). This puts us in a precarious position—what are the next steps if not enough staff in our Faculty take up the VS for the Faculty's target of cost reductions to be achieved? We are angry about this situation, which could have been avoided, as it is putting existing jobs at risk. We also feel that there has been a lack of oversight by the next tier of management — i.e. PVC-Academic — over the Faculties.

We should all be asking questions about the line in very recent months put out to the press and to colleagues that this is a sudden crisis brought about by a drop in (especially February) numbers in the so-called 'part-time sector'. No organisation facing a financial crisis and then creating a plan to achieve large cost reductions ever does so based on a 'one-off' fall in income.

So what does the phrase 'falling numbers' actually mean? Are these falling numbers new recruits, which is what the OU seems to want everyone to think, or is it a fall in the total number of students studying during an academic year? The OU dominates the part-time market (some 60%), so saying that the part-time market has seen a major contraction is saying that the OU has seen a major contraction: it can't be blamed on 'the market' and in any case we have also been told recently that the OU benefited from the decline in part-time numbers elsewhere in the sector. A grown-up, transparent senior leadership team should be open about the balance in the share in the fall in numbers between different kinds of students, i.e. (a) falling, i.e. drop-outs, in the numbers of 'transitional' students (those in the system before 2012 and allowed to finish studies by 2017 at the old fee level); (b) falling levels of recruitment of new students year-on-year and (c) the numbers of

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new students who do not return the following year. If it isn't, then colleagues across the University are shut out of critical information that would allow them to form a proper view of the future sustainability of the University and how it is best achieved."

**UCU member**

### IT Policy and impact: Petition on AL forum

"No doubt you've been contacted about the latest decision from IT about switching off access to email via POP3 or IMAP. The first thing I should say is that IT's claim that it's necessary to conform to Cyber Essentials is nonsense: there is no such guideline. Indeed, Cambridge University strongly recommends that their staff and students access email via IMAP: [www.ucl.ac.uk/email/muasettings/generic.html](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/email/muasettings/generic.html).

...and there are many other universities with similar guidance. So, their reasoning is flawed. There's more about this in the following AL forum thread:

<http://learn3.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/discuss.php?d=42146>.

Since the announcement, the AL forums have been full of dismay and confusion. Many ALs are now simply not going to check their mail from their phone, or from anywhere except their desktop PC: this doesn't look like progress to me, especially not for our students.

So, rather than watch yet another unnecessary and unworkable IT policy get forced through (and they'll come for central staff next), I created a "petition" on the AL forum:

<http://learn3.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/discuss.php?d=42125>

Note that this is different from the announcement earlier this year preventing ALs and central staff from auto-forwarding email. Back then, IT said that IMAP (and POP3) was also permitted. Now, a few months later, IT have declared that ALs can no longer use IMAP or POP3. The reason for this relates to IT's desire to control ALs' mobile devices, but it impacts ALs who access email via these methods on desktops/laptops too."

**UCU member**

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### An Appreciation

"This is a short note to let the OU UCU office know about the fantastic support I received from one of your caseworkers.

The caseworker acted on my case for over a year during the resolution of employment and USS pension issues. During this drawn-out and difficult period, she accompanied me to several formal meetings with the University and met with me personally to discuss my circumstances in detail. The caseworker was extremely supportive and understanding, everything I could imagine a 'Union' representative to be. She was there when I needed support and advice—both professional and personal. It was my great fortune to have her assigned to 'my case'.

Together with excellent input from Gabi Evans (OU HR) and my HOD, a successful outcome was finally secured earlier this year. I can't thank the UCU caseworker enough here - needless to say, I've tried!"

**UCU member, Science Faculty**

### Reply to comment article (Feburary 2015 issue of *the Spark*)

The editors have been asked to print this reply to a piece that appeared in the last issue of *the Spark*.

"I would like to express my disappointment in the article by Meridian published in your last edition (February 2015) on the alleged gender bias within the Annual Report.

This report includes articles about women conducting world-leading research in cancer detection, combining study with working in operating theatres, managing and winning awards for educational development projects, and being Chancellor of our University. These are not 'passive roles'.

My team have to be proactive to find and choose examples that reflect the breadth of our demographic. We only use real people, not actors and models within our publications, and each person depicted is shown in their own context. Whilst it is much easier to represent diversity if choosing from glossy stock shots, which I think is Meridian's suggestion, I believe it is much less convincing.



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Where I do agree with Meridian, is that communications are a catalyst for challenging stereotypes. Careful thought, planning and execution went into the choices of written and visual examples for the Annual Report. I have a high proportion of women in my senior team and my unit, none of them shrinking violets, who are, like me, passionately committed to this.

If Meridian, or any of your readers, wishes to highlight to us stories of female staff, students and alumni for our next annual report, reflecting the University's innovation, contribution to the economy/business and commitment to widening participation, it is the perfect time to let us know."

**Lucian Hudson, Director of Communications**

## Branch meetings 2015

Future branch meeting dates are as follows and all members are welcome to attend—these meetings are held in Room B232, 2nd floor Wilson B block, the AL representation meeting room. You can take part remotely by using our OU live room, please contact the branch office for instructions on how to set this up.

**OU Live room address:** <http://learn3.open.ac.uk/mod/oucollaborate/view.php?id=44811>

Tuesday 30 June 2015 at 12.30pm  
Wednesday 23 September 2015 at 12.30pm  
AGM, Wednesday 18 November 2015 at 12.30pm

### **The Open University branch of UCU**

Room 015 Wilson C Block,  
The Open University,  
Walton Hall,  
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA  
Phone: (01908) 6(53069)  
email: [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk)  
Web: [www.ucu.open.ac.uk](http://www.ucu.open.ac.uk)  
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/oubucu>

## UCU resources

The following resources are available for any member who wants some, please call into room 015, Wilson C block, Walton Hall and

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collect some or email [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) and we will send some to you—it all helps to raise awareness of the Union.

- Cloth bag
- Mug (collection only)
- Lanyards
- Pens
- A5 note pads
- UCU Publicity posters.



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**Our mailing address is:**

**Room 015, Wilson C block, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA**

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