



The Open University branch of UCU

The Spark — November 2010

STAND UP FOR EDUCATION ON 10 NOVEMBER 2010

The demonstration organised by UCU and the NUS in central London next Wednesday 10 November promises to be the biggest campaigning event on an educational issue for many decades. And the seriousness of the threat to HE and FE reflected in the comprehensive spending review and the Browne report merits such a massive response. Reports from all over the country indicate that many thousands of staff and students will come together to get the message over to the government and the general public that higher and further education changes the lives of people and that education and skills will be crucial to Britain's economic recovery.

The OU UCU will be taking part together with OUSA and the OU branch of UNISON. A free coach will leave Walton Hall at 9.30am and return after the demonstration probably leaving London at 4 - 4.30 pm. Transport is being arranged from many areas of the country.

If you are intending to take part please email ucu@open.ac.uk to ensure you receive final details and can link up with others from the branch. Please also email that address if you want to book a seat on the coach or details of travel from other areas.

The University is not publicly supporting the event but recognises that many staff will wish to do so though internal staff will have to take a day's leave.

Please stand up for education and make your voice heard on 10 November 2010, further information at www.demo2010.org.



STOP PRESS: Branch AGM

The AGM of the branch will be held on Tuesday 23rd November at 12.30pm in the Berrill Lecture Theatre. This meeting will be available on the Stadium website at: <http://stadium.open.ac.uk>. The results of the elections to the branch executive for next year will be announced at this meeting.

Resist the attack on your pensions

Vote NO in the UCU referendum, send an email to consultation@ucu.org.uk with a 2 word subject "defend USS", you will then be sent a link to vote in the UCU referendum.

Tell USS what you think about the proposals in the USS consultation at www.ussconsultation.co.uk

For an up to date report on the campaign and more details, see pages 4 & 5.

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The Browne report — a curate's egg

Whilst the Browne report relating to the future of University funding in England has justifiably attracted strong opposition from most of the HE sector, mainly because of the draconian reduction in teaching funding and the proposal to abolish any cap on tuition fees - subsequently modified by the government which has announced there will be a cap of something approaching £12,000, which is hardly consolation, there was some good news for the OU in the report.



Firstly the report proposes to level the playing field between full time and part time education in relation to fees and financial support but with two significant caveats, and secondly the report opens the door to a review of the invidious ELQ policy introduced in 2007 by the last government and which has had a major impact on the OU.

The caveats in relation to the level playing field are that firstly Browne proposes to limit access to financial support provisions to students taking at least 40 credit points and secondly Browne proposes to use the UCAS points system and the concept of 'normal' university entrance requirements as prerequisite for access to support. These restrictions would each significantly reduce the number of OU students who would benefit from Browne's proposals and the second is entirely incompatible with the OU's fundamental principle of open access so it is no surprise but very welcome that the Vice Chancellor is committed to arguing the case for both to be relaxed.

However despite these pieces of good news for the OU, the slashing of teaching funding will have fundamental implications though it is too soon to assess these properly. Firstly it is virtually certain that there will have to be a massive increase in student fees probably to a level which will deter many potential students. Secondly the huge reduction in teaching funding could threaten the viability of some courses and even some departments. We also note with great concern that the fee payment proposals are highly regressive because of the above inflation interest charges - so those with higher incomes will be able to afford to repay more quickly and therefore pay less overall - and are discriminatory because women who are more likely to take career breaks will take longer to repay - though Browne proposes that all debts will be written off after 30 years.

It is no consolation to OU UCU members to know that Browne's proposals to introduce a virtually unregulated market for higher education will present an even bigger threat to many other universities especially but not only post 92 institutions.

Roger Walters, Branch President

Default Retirement age



The University has still not decided when it will abolish the default retirement age though it will almost certainly be legally required to do so by October 2011 at the latest. It is understood that management is discussing the timing of abolition and that a decision may be made soon. The OU UCU has pressed strongly for a positive decision as quickly as possible, to remove a discriminatory and outmoded policy.

National Dispute with Employers

A special Higher Education Sector Conference will take place on Thursday 25th November to consider what action to take in relation to pay, jobs and pensions. A special meeting of the OU branch will be held on Tuesday 9th November at 12.30 pm in Michael Young meeting rooms 1 & 2, to consider what motions we should put to the special conference.

At the last branch meeting a motion was passed overwhelmingly which supported the decision in early September of the Higher Education Committee to defer a ballot on industrial action and which stressed that whilst members are deeply unhappy about the employers' 'final' pay offer of 0.4%, in current circumstances the defence of jobs and of our pensions were much more important priorities and that any industrial action ballot should take place when there was likely to be maximum support for action.

A series of consultation meetings has taken place to assess branch views and it is becoming very clear that there is no appetite for industrial action on pay, that there is some support for action on jobs but that is greatest when the threat is close at hand, but that there is significant support among pre 92 universities for action to defend our pensions should the employers' proposals be imposed. As yet the implications of the Hutton report on public sector pensions, which will have drastic implications on the Teachers Pension Scheme, which most post 92 university staff are in, have not really been realised by affected staff.

Research Staff Titles

Following a well attended meeting of research staff in July, UCU has presented counter proposals to those of the University which are, in particular, intended to facilitate career progression for research staff. At the time of writing a meeting with the University to discuss these proposals is imminent.

Demolition of Geoffrey Crowther building

Following concerns expressed by UCU about the rumoured high cost of demolishing the Geoffrey Crowther building, the University has published on the intranet a much fuller explanation of the reasons for doing so than it had previously given. The University pointed out that that the building was in a very poor condition and the cost of refurbishment and to meet legislative standards would be prohibitive and that demolition will reduce carbon emissions. Furthermore the cost of demolition is being met from funds which are earmarked by HEFCE for capital funding so not available for other purposes and which need to be spent by March 2011 or they would be clawed back.

Departmental reviews

UCU is at various stages of discussions with the University on a number of departmental reviews including: the University's decision to close CHERI, the Centre for Higher Education Research and Innovation, which is based in London;

- the major review of the management structure of Student Services including the proposal to abolish the position of Regional Directors in the English regions;
- spending reductions on the PGCE in the light of a reduction in funding from the Teaching and Development Agency;
- the merger of the Centres for Widening Participation and for Outcomes Based Education into the Centre for Innovation and Curriculum;
- changes affecting the OU Awarding Body which is part of OU Validation Services.

In all these and all other reviews the fundamental objective of UCU is to avoid any compulsory redundancies.

Members in each of the areas concerned are being kept informed of developments and anyone wanting any further information should contact ucu@open.ac.uk.

USS update

In July 2010, the “Independent Chair” of the USS JNC, Sir Andrew Cubie, exercised his casting vote in favour of draconian benefit cuts for USS members. These have been detailed in national communications so I need not repeat them here.

These changes were vindictive and unnecessary last July. They are even more so now.

Three main changes have taken place since July which have improved the financial position of USS immensely:

1. The Con-Dem Government has announced its intention to link pension indexation to CPI rather than RPI. This represents a saving of at least 1.8% on USS contribution rates and has improved the funding position of the scheme by at least 6%. Regardless of the impact of any other changes, this will ensure that USS is in surplus at its next valuation in 2011 – as it was at its last valuation in 2008.
2. The forthcoming abolition of the default retirement age – not to mention the intention to increase the state pension age – will lead to many members working longer, paying pension contributions for longer and drawing their pensions for shorter periods. In consequence, USS will be quids in!
3. The value of USS assets increased by £4.5bn in the last financial year – an event marked by the award of bonus payments totalling almost £3m to staff in the USS Investments Office. Crisis? What crisis?

USS remains an immature scheme with income exceeding outgoings by many hundreds of millions of pounds per year. This is forecast to continue for years to come. There is absolutely no justification for the benefit cuts threatened – cuts that risk destroying USS as a worthwhile pension scheme.

In an obscure annex to their proposals – and one which they have not referred to in their published consultation material – the employers boasted that their ultimate objective is to reduce their contribution rate (our deferred pay!) from 16% to 10% in the long term.

But – as the old saying goes – in the long term, we are all dead! Even if the employers were to get their way on all of their proposals, it would be many years before they would realise any significant savings. In the meantime, they seem intent on provoking the largest and most disruptive industrial dispute the university system has ever seen – a dispute that will inflict huge costs in the short term.

In view of the gigantic losses involved - £130,000 in lost pensions expectations for someone following a fairly standard career path – members are prepared to contemplate action of unprecedented strength and duration. Not token days – but weeks and months of action!

Time is running out. Employers and the UCC Board have until 20 January 2011, when the Board next meets, to wise up and return to the negotiating table. **If they don't, UCU will launch an immediate ballot with a view to initiating action in March 2011.**

In the meantime – and in a last attempt to get the employers to see reason – members can help in the following ways:

- **Vote “NO” in the UCU Referendum and encourage your colleagues** – members and non members alike – to do likewise. Send an email to consultation@ucu.org.uk with the two-word subject line **“defend USS”**, you will then be sent a link to the referendum. (Please note that the referendum is open to all USS members AND all those eligible to join USS so that means all OU staff.)
- Take advantage of the formal employer/USS consultation to tell them what you think of their attack on our pensions and to explain why their proposals are unnecessary and unacceptable. A suggested response to each online question at www.ussconsultation.co.uk is:
“This proposal is part of an overall package which is detrimental to both existing and future members of USS, and which creates a highly divisive and damaging two tier benefits system. The challenges facing USS could be dealt with without reducing benefits by adopting the UCU proposals. My clear view is that the USS Board should listen to fund members, and not implement the employers’ detrimental package of proposals.”
- Write to the Independent Chair of the JNC, Sir Andrew Cubie (c/o Universities Superannuation Scheme Limited, 2nd Floor, Royal Liver Building, Liverpool, L3 1PY) saying what you think of his outrageous decision to back unnecessary cuts and demanding that he take a final initiative to resolve a potentially horrendous dispute by putting the employers proposals on ice and summoning the parties back to the negotiating table.

This is a dispute we can win – and must win!

Alan Carr, UCU National Treasurer

USS



Sir Andrew Cubie

VOTE NO

Defend
our
USS

Your pension is in danger!

UCU says that scheme members must have a voice. We have launched a referendum of all scheme members and USS eligible staff groups – whether or not they are UCU members – to allow that voice to be heard.

It is vital that you use your vote and that you encourage all USS eligible staff to participate. PLEASE VOTE NOW!

Email: consultation@ucu.org.uk with the two-word subject line: Defend USS, you will then be sent a unique web address to take part in the referendum, which is open until the start of December 2010.

UCU is trying to stop the employers from forcing through changes to your USS pension scheme that will have a real and damaging effect on the benefits you and your family receive. These proposals were forced through the **scheme's governing body and are now out to consultation.**

Sham consultation

96% of participants in a recent UCU ballot on the USS changes voted to reject the employers' proposals.

Perhaps because of this, the employers have done everything possible to avoid conducting a proper ballot of all scheme

members. They have refused our requests to hold either national or local ballots.

Instead, the employers have commissioned a PR firm to manage the consultation. There will be no ballot.

The employers' proposals

The employers' proposals would mean:

- the loss of the right to a full pension for staff made redundant,
- an end to final salary benefits for new starters with a loss of more than £100,000 in benefits for many staff,
- the loss of final salary benefits for staff made redundant or who take a career break and do not rejoin the sector within six months,
- the loss of final salary benefits for fixed term staff with employment gaps of more than six months,
- staff losing access to final salary benefits will receive an inferior career average revalued earnings (CARE) pension benefit.



No need for these changes

Actuarial advice secured by UCU has confirmed that there is no crisis in the USS scheme, whatever the employers try to claim. In fact, USS is in excellent health and grew by £4.5 billion in the twelve months up to March 2010.

We are not opposed to changes to secure the scheme in the long term and have made our own proposals for cost sharing. But the employers have ignored these. The fact is that the employers are trying to reduce the cost of the scheme to themselves and, we believe, to undermine it in the longer term.

Unfair and unworkable

The employers' proposals are unfair. If you are threatened with redundancy, are a new starter, are on a casual contract or are a woman seeking a career break, you face immediate and major detriments now. But we also believe that the employers' proposals will create a two-tier scheme that is financially unworkable and will lead to pressures to remove final salary benefits for all staff. This has been the employers' preferred option all along.

Please note you are only able to vote in this referendum if you are a member of USS or are eligible to be a member of USS.

ALs & Display Screen Equipment

It is several years since the OU UCU branch pointed out to the OU that the AL job required sufficient use of computers that at least some ALs should be considered DSE (Display Screen Equipment) users for purposes of complying with the DSE regulations. It follows from this that their workstations should be assessed and that certain elements, e.g. an adjustable chair, should be part of the workstation.

The OU is about to trial a version of the Cardinus system for carrying out DSE training and workstation assessments for ALs, but the position of the OU management is that they have no responsibility for provision of “office equipment” or for providing an allowance towards the cost of it.

Since the Health and Safety at Work Act came into force in the 1970s it has been the responsibility of the employer under Section 9, quoted below, to make provision to meet legislative requirements:-

“No employer shall levy or permit to be levied on any employee of his any charge in respect of anything done or provided in pursuance of any specific requirement of the relevant statutory provisions.”

The OU UCU branch has made several attempts to resolve the issue, and has asked management to make a joint approach with us to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), and more recently attempted a conciliation process via ACAS. Regrettably the OU management unilaterally walked away from the conciliation process after an initial meeting with ACAS.

At this point the OU UCU branch committee decided it had no alternative but to unilaterally seek the involvement of the HSE.

In the meantime, we would ask AL members to get in touch with us if they come under any pressure to purchase extra equipment at their own expense.

When the current AL contract came in it wasn't even on the radar that ALs might be DSE users, and no obligations were included in the contract. A work contract can only be changed by collective agreement or individual agreement.

We believe the cost of sorting this out would be less than the money currently being thrown away due to management's refusal to negotiate a solution to the impasse over PensionSmart.

Lesley Kane, Hon. Secretary



UCU members can now update their details online!

The national UCU website now has a secure area where members can go to update their personal information, the new eServices area allows members to update their:

- Personal details,
- Home address,
- Workplace details,
- Subscription details.

The web address for the new eServices area is: <https://members.ucu.org.uk> and should allow UCU to hold more accurate details on it's members. You need to register on the eServices website the first time you use it and you need your UCU membership number to do this. Please email ucu@open.ac.uk if you don't know your membership number.



OU branch of UCU website: www.ucu.open.ac.uk

The branch website has a “What’s new” page so you can see what has changed recently on it: www.ucu.open.ac.uk.

- A fourth set of results from the branch TMA marking time survey for all ALs has been posted on the ALs page.
- Another video has been added to the News page about the USS proposals campaign.

Vacancies in our Branch



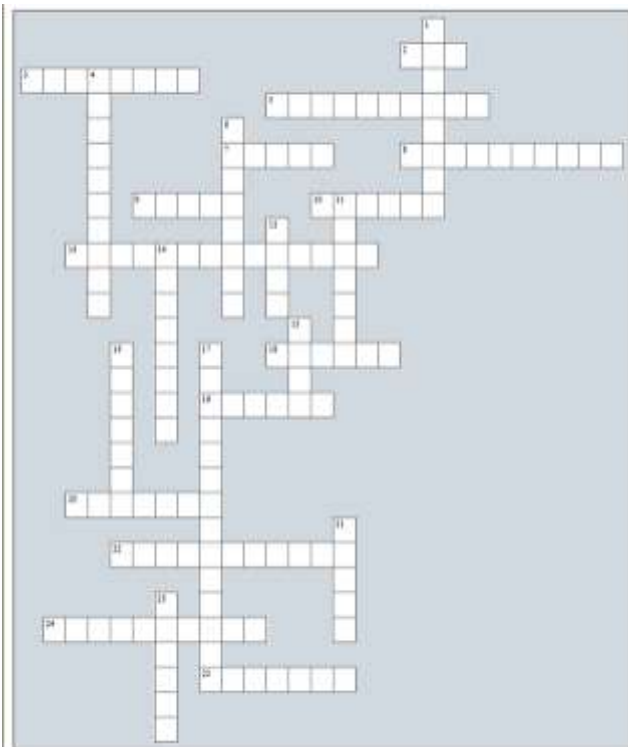
Regional/National centres—we are still looking for a UCU rep in South West, West Midlands, East of England and the North regional/national centres.

Walton Hall Department/Faculty reps—we would like a UCU rep in the following departments/faculties:

Audit	Human Resources	OU Students Association
Business Development Unit (BDU) & OU Worldwide	Information Office	Research School
Centre for Inclusion & Curriculum (CIC)	Institute of Educational Technology (IET)	Secretary's Office
Communications	Knowledge Media Institute (Kmi)	Strategy Office
Development Office	Learning, Teaching & Quality (LTQ)	Student Services
Faculty of Science	Library Services	Vice Chancellor's office
Finance	Maths, Computing & Technology faculty (MCT)	
Government Relations	Open Broadcasting Unit	

If you are interested in taking one of these roles, please contact Deb on 01908 6(53069) or email ucu@open.ac.uk

Crossword — the Spark November 2010



Across

- 2 Free gift available to any UCU member from the Branch office (3)
- 3 In which Country was golf first played? (8)
- 5 Capital of New Zealand (10)
- 7 What colour derives from the Latin root word meaning shade? (5)
- 8 Edgbaston Test Cricket Ground is in which town? (10)
- 9 Type of tree that is now a sculpture next to Walton Hall (5)
- 10 On which island was Nelson Mandela incarcerated for 27 years, from 1962-1990?
- 13 Common name for Aurora Borealis (8, 6)
- 18 Organ that filters our blood (6)
- 19 Largest state in the USA (6)
- 20 Which shop had the first escalator installed in 1900? (7)
- 22 Who wrote the 1513 guide to leadership (titled in English) The Prince? (11)
- 24 The study of insects (10)
- 25 Which jubilee will the Queen celebrate in 2012? (7)

Down

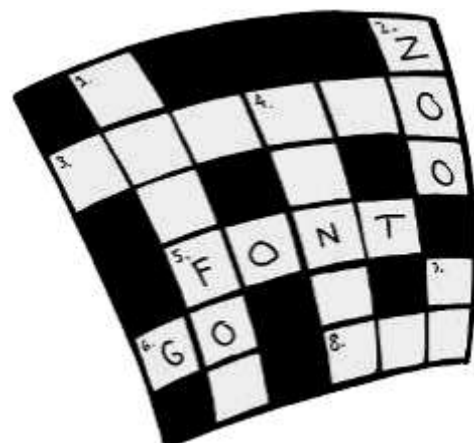
- 1 **Mozart's nationality (8)**
- 4 **Cliff Richard's backing group (3, 7)**
- 6 What are these all types of: Dram, Colon, Won, Dong & Kip? (8)
- 11 Shape with 8 sides (7)
- 12 What type of creature is a bobolink? (4)
- 14 **Literally means "belly cutting" in Japanese (4,4)**
- 15 Colour of a double word square on a Scrabble board (4)
- 16 5th planet from the sun (7)
- 17 New name for the Offices 6 building at Walton Hall (7, 7)
- 21 Instrument with keys, pedals and strings (5)
- 23 The study of plants (6)

Crossword Solution — the Spark August 2010

ACROSS	
3	Sweetcorn
6	Elementary my dear...
8	Important OU visitor in June 2010
9	Southern European Country
10	Taunt
11	Garret
13	Important MK building opened in 1999
16	Urgent or pressing
17	European Mountain range
19	Not pretty
DOWN	
1	Mr Claus
2	Plant, lens culinaris, having flat seeds used in cooking
4	Location of UCU Congress 2010
5	Fussy
7	Red
11	Sulphuric or acetic
12	Quotes
14	New name for Refectory
15	Ways out of a building
18	Small green veg

- MAIZE
- WATSON
- CAMERON
- ALBANIA
- TEASE
- ATTIC
- MK THEATRE
- EXIGENT
- ALPS
- UGLY

- SANTA
- LENTIL
- MANCHESTER
- CHOOSY
- SCARLETT
- ACID
- CITES
- THE HUB
- EXITS
- PEAS



YOUR EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (2010)

President: Roger Walters (r.j.walters) x 58810
Honorary Secretary: Lesley Kane (lhk4@tutor.open.ac.uk)
Honorary Treasurer: David Knowles (d.w.knowles)
Vice Presidents: Mike McNulty & Alan Carr
Immediate Past President: John Bennett
Equality Officer: John Bennett
Central Academic Staff Officer: vacancy
Central Academic-Related Staff Officer: June Payne
Regional Academic Staff Officer: Judy Ekins
Regional Academic-Related Staff Officer: Pauline Collins
Associate Lecturers Staff Officer: Sue Hawthorne

Ordinary Members:

Chris Bollom
 Eric Bowers
 Gill Clough
 Bruce Heil
 Phil Hill
 John James
 Malcolm Jenner
 Maria McCrea
 Meridian
 Bethan Norfor
 John Peters
 Peter Piper
 Ceri Phillips
 Ian Stevenson
 Eric Wade

NEC Members:

Alan Carr
 Pauline Collins
 Angie McConnell
 Lesley Kane
 Roger Walters
 Father of NUJ Chapel - vacant

NEED HELP?

UCU Caseworkers are here!

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.

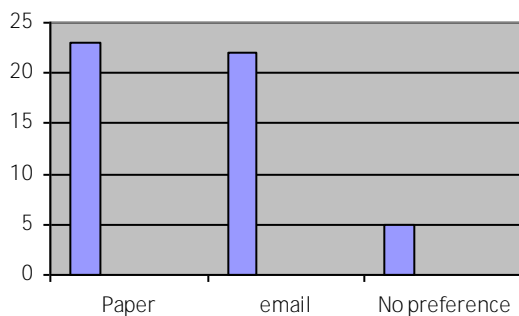
The Open University branch of UCU

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STOP PRESS: UCU mug available for any member who wants one, please call into room 015, Wilson C block and collect your UCU mug! It helps to raise awareness of the Union.



Member's feedback on the paper Spark August 2010



Thank you to all members who sent in their feedback on our last paper issue of Spark. The branch was very pleased to receive 50 emails giving feedback on whether members preferred the paper issue to an email issue.

The results were very close but 23 members preferred the paper issue, compared to 22 members prefer to receive the newsletter on email. 5 members had no preference either way.