

The Open University branch of UCU

The Spark (supplementary issue) February 2012

Continental Europe—over 100 OU jobs on the line

UCU seeks deferral to allow meaningful consultation and consideration of alternatives

The humanitarian aspects of the proposed OU redundancies in Europe are appalling.

The OU UCU branch has received a number of accounts like the following from staff originally encouraged to work in Europe by the OU, who will face an almost impossible task in rebuilding their lives if they are made redundant. For some it may even mean uprooting themselves: -

"I am 57 years old living in Germany. I have been an AL since 2004 and in this time have worked hard for my students and to build up a portfolio of employment opportunities in the OU. This often involves work "beyond the call of duty". I am currently the principal breadwinner in the family supporting my wife and 2 teenage daughters. We have a mortgage. My gross income from the OU was £31,248 in the UK tax year 2010/11. This represents about 75% of my total income.

My chances of obtaining full-time employment in Germany entering the labour market at the age of 57 are effectively zero. I could possibly relocate to the UK to maintain my OU employment, but my two daughters are deeply embedded in the German school system and it is unlikely they could come with me, **without risking ... everything."**

The academic aspects are also very serious. Many students in CE have been recruited believing that local support from staff with knowledge of their countries will be available: -

"The majority of my students (B821/B831) have always been "locals" (people living in CWE). As I teach Finance I believe it is key to have local tutors.

A lot of the questions asked by students start from their own knowledge of business practices in their countries. As I have extensive experience working in France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Netherlands, I do understand where these questions come from and I am able to explain difference between UK or US and continental approaches. I would not have been able to develop an in-depth understanding of business practices in these countries if it was not for the fact that I speak French, Dutch, German and Spanish and read Italian."

It is impossible to comment on the business case because we haven't seen it. Although the Strategic Planning and Resources Committee agreed two weeks ago to recommend to Council that it should declare a potential redundancy situation we have still, despite repeated requests, to see the business case for these proposed redundancies. In addition the reasons so far published and given to the staff concerned are very vague.

The lack of openness over the reasons for the proposed redundancies has left a sense of shock amongst CE staff who regard **the proposed redundancies based on their location as being contrary to the OU's mission statement.**

It is also becoming increasingly clear that withdrawal from employing staff in CE will not come cheap in terms of damage to the Open University's reputation and getting enmeshed in potentially costly legal action.

We have asked OU Council to reject the proposal to initiate a redundancy process with regard to our OU staff in Europe, and to create the opportunity for a full consideration of the issue, in the light of all the facts and in order to allow consultation to take place PRIOR to decisions being made which will lead to redundancies.

OU Council will be considering this on 28th February 2012.



ALs in Continental Europe—a member's view

In an email sent out on January 5, 2012 the Open University (OU) communicated its intention to do away with all staff based in Continental Europe (CE), subject to approval by the Council. The announcement came as a shock not only to its recipients but those in our line management, central academics and administrative staff and representatives in elected bodies. Not only is the language in the communication vague and disengaged, it bears the weight of a fait-accompli. The general impression in **the discussions in fora is that the Council will merely "rubber stamp" it. Not only** is the claim for transparency not supported by arguments, but the decision is handed down by the highest echelons of HR without any prior consultation, placing line-management in a very awkward position. The announcement and subsequent communications are at pains to assure us that the move does not reflect on the level of service of long committed CE Associate Lectures (ALs). **How mass culling of staff tallies with an employer highly valuing them is anyone's guess.** The application across the board with complete disregard to any of the merits of the CE based staff is suggestive of how the University views its staff. **Rather than being treated as individuals "on the basis of their abilities" (as the University claims in its Statement of Equality and Diversity),** groups of staff can expect to be shown the door.

This comes in the wake of much noise about expansion to new markets (among which CE features centrally). Most of us have been expecting to play a more important role in that and some have been actively and unknowingly encouraged in their increased commitment. In the past weeks many of us affected have been trying to relate to the decision makers the attributes of this most global of the

OU's components and the role we can play in the University's global vision. The CE based staff have been eagerly promoting the OU's cause in CE, with active recruitment, even proposals of how to best position the University in European Countries. The local knowledge, the international profile, the increased range of competence, the personal professional networks, the diversity imparted to the University's ideas, sensibilities and practices are to be cut off along with the bill to CE. Further, the University seems oblivious to the gap this move will leave on the ground: CE ALs, like their island counterparts, have been recruited one-by-one based on merit, have been moulded for years by the OU values – even if they did not completely identify with them at joining! **Contractors to fill in the holes won't come cheap. The strategic vision that sees one of the most internationally versed components of the OU as a liability rather than an asset remains opaque. Or is the OU withdrawing from its global ambitions?**

Still, the lack of prior consultation, the style of delivering the "Proposed changes of employment arrangements in Continental Europe" and the apparent inconsistency of the move with the University's alleged strategic planning are not the most disturbing aspects of this story.

With this move the University will be annulling its commitment to inclusiveness and openness to people and places. It is not only the 100 potentially affected staff who find this alarming.

Most of my colleagues on either side of the Channel remain hopeful that the Council of February 28 will examine this issue taking into consideration all aspects beyond the (still largely unsubstantiated) "regulatory, operational and financial drivers" and adopt a stance that focuses on growth and increased revenue through investing in its resources, while abandoning self-defeating, blind cost-cutting measures.

Hara Papathanassiou, PhD, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

AL on S283, S383, SXP288, SXP390, SMT359, MST121, MS221 and a number of discontinued courses, since 2003; piCETL member and course S383 material author.



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.

Dear Spark Editor

In 2008, my first year as an A215 Associate Lecturer and based just over the river from the Gateshead hub of R09, I spoke to a member of regional management about the possibility of relocating to Berlin to tutor the same module. While they reminded me that my continued contract was always subject to student enrolment numbers (wherever I chose to live), they also **enthused about the OU's long term intentions of expansion into Continental Europe, saying that prospective students in more countries, particularly those in former eastern Europe, would soon be offered modules and that new ALs in Europe could well assist in that recruitment drive, even potentially build their number of Tutor Groups, as the CE student numbers grew.**

I found all of this encouraging, not to say inspiring, as I decided to put into motion my plans to move to Germany. In September 2011, I moved to Berlin and received the details of my CE-based Tutor Group shortly afterwards. Having set up a Berlin bank account, I felt ready to whole-heartedly commit to Europe, glad I could be sure my employer had the same positive long term commitment. I enquired via regional management and the Pay Roll department in R09 about changing my contract to a German one. Ready assistance was given and my German contract began, dated 1st December 2011.

Imagine my surprise when less than six weeks later, the abrupt and completely unpredicted message was posted to me and **published on TutorHome saying that the University "considers that the current business model of employing staff directly in country (excluding the UK and the Republic of Ireland) is no longer sustainable for the future."**

Although this announcement contained words like "proposal" as well as "consider", a very short timescale was given in terms of when a decision would be made and once made, when implemented – late February 2012 for the decision and between July and October for implementation.

Both the regional management and the Pay Roll clerk in R09 were appalled on my behalf that they had effectively (though unknowingly) assisted in lining me up for potential redundancy.

Their lack of knowledge or forewarning points to a very worrying aspect of the way this proposal has been put together and the justifications or rationale behind it. This has to do with the dissemination of information.

That there was so little warning in the way of communication of the seriousness of this proposal to AL Line Managers and other senior regional staff is disturbing and deeply ironic given the pride the University takes in its ever-evolving and ground-breaking use of Information Technology in distance learning. It seems the word distance was applied in an altogether different way in terms of who was told what regarding the future of staff employed in Continental Europe.

Cast iron certainties, concerning the facts and figures underpinning this proposal also seem thin on the ground and fellow ALs, in the CE-based section of the OU Business School, have even cast doubt on some of the OU statistics concerning the difficulties of financial compliance in the countries concerned and are frustrated that their own CE-**familiar "on-the-ground" know-how and economic creativity isn't at least being consulted in seeking an alternative to redundancies.**

Ultimately, my contract may be brought to an end, not because of a lack of work (i.e. insufficient student enrolment on the module I teach) but because of where I live.

But if the University's claim that CE students will receive the same standard of service (and the OU presumably want to sustain – or even grow - the numbers of CE students on my module and others in CE) who, if not me and my current fellow CE colleagues, will be doing this work?

Carol McGuigan, A215 Associate Lecturer

R09 Open University, Berlin

Letters to the Editor continued

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Dear Spark Editor

Human Resources have so far offered very little to justify the huge changes they propose. I hope that Council is going to have a good deal more than "regulatory, operational and financial" reasons on which to base a decision that is going to have a major impact on the OU and its students in CE.

There also seems to be a myth developing that OU students in CE will not experience any difference in the support they receive. Country Coordinators are threatened with the sack, tutors who offer face to face tutor group meetings are threatened **with the sack**. **There are regular study skills workshops, open days, Beginning of Year Meetings offered around the "mainland"** that all appear vulnerable. Many OU students in CE never meet a person from the OU in the flesh but many do. I ran a tutor group meeting for DD101 yesterday in Frankfurt, a Beginning of Year is planned for February 18th in Hamburg. Will the OU fly staff in for future meetings like this?

Students are not distributed evenly around "the continent" and where there are concentrations of students the OU can offer a range of support. As I have no experience of working with students in the UK I cannot say for sure but I get the impression that students there seem reluctant to travel for meetings. That is not the case in CE - students will travel many hours, across borders, to meet their tutor.

The OU is also about to lose 100 people who work day in and day out with students who know very little of the British educational culture never mind its higher educational culture. OU tutors in CE are well versed in helping students making sense of this. While there are some tutors in the UK and Ireland, particularly in Region 9, who also do this, a group of 100 of the most experienced in this work are about to go overnight. That is a substantial loss of expertise.

I have said nothing of working with students who are studying in their second language. Can the OU afford to lose 100 overnight? Students in CE are going to lose out. The OU is going to lose valuable personnel.

The material I have seen from Human Resources says that students will not see any difference in the support that they are offered. The irony of course is that there has been no mention of falling student numbers as the reason for these proposals. The students seem to be there, the question has to be: who is going to tutor them?

Ray Gard, AL, DD101, DD131, DD208 and DD306.

We are working on a full issue of the Spark that will be issued shortly on issues affecting all categories of staff.

In the meantime we are sure all members will support our CE staff and the UCU branch in insisting on a full and genuine consultation prior to initiating a process likely to lead to redundancies, in order to find an alternative solution.

The lack of openness about the OU's business case for dismissing staff in CE has so far denied the staff concerned and UCU the chance to argue against the business case or for alternatives or improvements that could save their jobs.