

The Open University branch of UCU

# The Spark—August 2011

## Yes – it really is the last chance to defend our USS pensions

Decisive votes “yes” for strike action and “yes” for action short of a strike in the current ballot will give us a fighting chance to bring the employers back to the table and to safeguard decent pensions for the future. If we fail to deliver, we will face the imposition of draconian cuts from 1<sup>st</sup> October 2011 leaving members facing losses of up to £250,000 in their pension expectations.

The threatened changes are vindictive and unnecessary. USS is fully funded and in robust financial good health. The money is there to guarantee decent pensions for the future.

There are two main motivating factors behind the threatened changes:

- the desire by hard line employers to slash their pension contribution (your deferred pay!) from the current rate of 16% to less than 10% of earnings;
- the desire of some in USS to undermine and cheapen the scheme in order to make it more attractive to the new private sector providers they expect to enter the HE sector in the wake of the Liberal/Tory “reforms” to HE funding.

There is another way. The alternative proposed by UCU is attractive, affordable and could form the basis for a negotiated settlement.

If implemented, the changes threatened by the employers will produce a huge “buffer” (surplus of income over expenditure) in USS funding – equivalent to at least 4% on contribution rates immediately rising to more than 6.5% in due course. These figures are based on very pessimistic assumptions on inflation, pay growth, investment returns and the other factors which influence costs. The real buffer would probably be in excess of 8%.

The cost of implementing the UCU alternative in full would be equivalent to around 3% of contribution rates – easily affordable and still leaving a healthy reserve for the future. As National Treasurer of UCU I wish I had the luxury of operating within such a huge margin for error!

A reasonable negotiated settlement is, therefore, both affordable and achievable. But negotiation and agreement can only take place if both sides are willing to engage. Regrettably, the employers have walked away from the table. They have done so because they doubt your determination to vote decisively for action in the current ballot.

Prove them wrong! Give your negotiators a renewed and decisive mandate to seek a settlement. The bigger the majority in the ballot – the greater the pressure on the employers to get back to the table and settle.

**Give us the strong mandate we need to defend your pension. Vote “yes” and “yes” in the ballot.**

Alan Carr, UCU National Treasurer, National USS negotiator & Branch Exec member

See page 2 for details of members briefing meetings on industrial action and page 12 for information on request-



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STOP PRESS: USS has created further controversy by awarding its chief executive, Tom Merchant, a £50,000 bonus for his hard work during a “demanding year”, this is on top of his annual salary of £311,000. Read full story at: <http://tgr.ph/pVScfn>.

## USS Briefing meetings on industrial action

In the expectation that members will vote for industrial action on the USS dispute, the branch executive has decided that action short of a strike will be focused on boycotting all work associated with exams and assessment, including the preparation and processing of any examination or assessment materials and marking exams or assignments - but providing teaching feedback to students on assignments will not be boycotted. We will also be asking members not to participate in CDSA.

# USS

We have arranged the following meetings in early September for internal staff to discuss and prepare for action. These will be as follows:

at Walton Hall

Tuesday 6 September, 11am	Arts Faculty members	Meeting room 11 Wilson A block, second floor
Tuesday 6 September, 3pm	Faculty of Business & Law members	MYB1, Michael Young building
Thursday 8 September, 11am	Social Sciences Faculty members	Room 006, Gardiner 1 building
Thursday 8 September, 12.30pm	Science Faculty members	Robert Hooke seminar room, ground floor
Thursday 8 September, 3pm	all non-faculty Walton Hall members	Christodoulou meeting room 1 (CMR01)
Tuesday 13 September, 11.30am	MCT Faculty members	S0049/Systems Seminar room, Venables building
Tuesday 13 September, 3pm	IET members	Ground floor meeting room, Jennie Lee building
Wednesday 14 September, 12.30pm	FELS members	FELS conference room, ground floor, Stuart Hall building
Wednesday 14 September, 3pm	HSC members	Room 203, Horlock building
Thursday 15 September, 11am	A meeting for anyone unable to attend their meeting above.	S0049/Systems Seminar room, Venables building

In regional and national centres:

Monday 5 September 1pm Gateshead in Derwent rooms 1 & 2	Wednesday 14 September 10.30 am Cardiff in Room MR01
Tuesday 6 September 1pm Oxford in the Conference room	Wednesday 14 September 1pm Manchester in Conference room 2
Wednesday 7 September 1pm Birmingham in the old Post room	Thursday 15 September 1pm Bristol, room to be advised
Wednesday 7 September 1pm Belfast in the Conference room	Thursday 15 September 1pm East Grinstead in the Surrey room
Thursday 8 September 10am Edinburgh in Room 1	Friday 16 September 1pm Leeds in the Conference room
Monday 12 September 1pm Nottingham in Conference room 3	No meeting is being arranged in Cambridge, but a video conference is being arranged for one of the Walton Hall meetings.
Tuesday 13 September 1pm London in Room 2b	

AL members are being consulted through their AL regional representatives - see full list at <http://ucu.open.ac.uk/al-reps>

## Fees announcement leaves many unanswered questions

The University's announcement that from September 2012, it will charge fees of £2500 for 60 point credit courses, raises more questions than it provides answers. The decision is, we are told, based on extensive market research but that research is not publicly available and so it is impossible to assess the implications.

How many students will be able and willing to pay this level of fee - with or without a loan? We are told that the student population will not be significantly smaller — but the inference is that there will be a drop in student numbers. What about students who want to dip their toe into the water of OU study but not commit to a qualification so not be eligible for loans?

And who will these students be? Will the OU retain a similar social mix to its current mix or will the new student population contain much fewer students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with low previous educational qualifications?

Will the OU attract sufficient students at this fee level to make up for the dramatic reduction in teaching funding? There has been no government announcement about funding for widening participation and there are some indications that the National Scholarship Funding will be focussed on school leavers which will considerably reduce the OU's ability to cater for widening participation groups.

At stake are the future financial viability of the OU and its ability to continue to fulfil its social mission. We are assured that both are secure but there is no evidence available to us to assess that assurance. If the University wants us all to work together to get through this crisis it needs to be far more open and share information with members of the OU community.

Meantime the OU management seems to be not only accepting but actively collaborating with the Tory government's agenda. This is to create a market in higher education and to facilitate both an expansion of the provision of HE through FE institutions on the cheap, and to open up HE to private providers. This will undermine quality and standards and threaten jobs, pay, pension rights and conditions of service for staff in HE. An HE system based on market forces and the ability to pay is totally at odds with the ethos of the OU.

We must not allow the OU to be used in this way to threaten the fundamental principles of the best HE system in the world.

Roger Walters, President

See also "Fees announcement causes concern" on page 5 and "Fees & Cuts" on page 13.



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## UCU in dispute over changes in English regional centres

The UCU branch has declared a dispute with the University over the way in which decisions were made about the ring fencing of some grade 7 posts in English regional centres. Though posts at higher grades have been ring fenced to staff on those grades - thereby denying any promotion opportunities for current grade 7 staff - grade 7 posts were open to lower grade staff. This angered very many grade 7s who felt they were being treated quite differently from staff on higher grades. UCU has pointed out that the university has acted in breach of the procedure agreement with UCU which provides for decisions on non normal advertising to be negotiated and with its own code of practice which requires consultation with the union on the application of any ring fencing.

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## UCU ballots on pay offer

UCU is balloting all members on the employers final pay offer of £150 for all points on all salary scales - with pro rata increases for ALs and others who are not full time.

Clearly this is for the third consecutive year a real terms pay cut. However the national negotiators have advised that there is no way of getting an improvement on this offer without sustained industrial action. The alternative we face therefore is either to accept the offer, albeit with great reluctance - and we will make it clear that this is further money on account owed to us when the current financial stringency in the public sector is over - or to authorise a ballot on industrial action. All recent evidence shows that there is no great enthusiasm among union members to take industrial action on pay because in the current climate, this is an unwinnable objective. At a time when we are involved in a massive battle to protect our pension rights which we cannot afford to lose it would dilute that absolutely critical battle if we also take action on an unwinnable battle.

Reluctantly therefore I would advise you to vote yes with the assurance that UCU will, in the event of a yes vote, make it very clear that this is reluctant acceptance of a completely unsatisfactory pay offer.

Roger Walters, President

## Centralisation of IT

Almost three months after the announced decision to centralise IT, and with the formal consultation period about to end, the University has still not completed making appointments of staff to posts in the new structure. Whilst some staff have opted for voluntary severance, there remain some who were not appointed to any new posts who are seeking redeployment. UCU is pressing for an extension to the consultation period to allow more time for redeployment and other redundancy avoidance measures to be properly explored.

Meantime management and union representatives have agreed to undertake a review of the whole process, which has been very messy and stressful for the staff concerned, to try and learn some lessons. Among issues which the union will raise are the need to get away from a near obsession with confidentiality and secrecy to facilitate more open and transparent discussion and from an earlier stage, and far better planning and communication.

Meantime there are still widespread concerns about the impact of centralisation of IT on the quality of service provided to units, especially in the Arts faculty where many staff have expressed their concern both about the decision itself and the process from which they were excluded and which was locked in secrecy.



## Closure of Bars postponed

Following widespread protests against the decision to close bars at Walton Hall, the university announced on 19 July that this decision, originally to have been implemented from the end of July 2011, had been postponed for two months to allow for consultation.

This met key demand of a petition signed by over 1200 staff and students which called for the decision to be postponed to allow time for informed consultation to include exploring alternatives to closure and to take into account the social and community value of the bars and not just financial considerations.

The scale of opposition to the proposed closure took the university by surprise and the way that younger members of staff and postgraduate students took a leading part in the campaign was particularly notable - it was a firm riposte to the thinly veiled management line that social habits have changed and it is only old buffers and union hacks who enjoy the bars!

What undoubtedly helped to swell the campaign was the arrogant and insensitive manner in which the decision was made, kept secret until very near the time of the proposed closure, and then promulgated with little or no solid information, no attempt at any consultation, and no consideration of the part that the bars have played and can continue to play in the social and community life of the University. To withdraw a facility for staff and on site students without any attempt at consultation angered many people, including many who never use the bars but believe that a decision like this should be taken only after consulting people and exploring alternatives.

It remains to be seen whether the promised consultation now to take place will be a meaningful one - but if it's not and the postponement is simply an attempt to defuse the situation there are many staff and on site students who will not sit back and allow this to happen. Old lags, union hacks and many others will remember a previous attempt to close on site bars about five years ago that met with a similar reaction. It appears that university management has learnt nothing from that experience.

See also "the power of protest" article on page 9.

### STUDENTS PROTEST AT UNIVERSITY'S CATERING CUTS



PEACEFUL: Students and staff question management about their plans to cut catering budgets. Photograph by Dave Phillips

## Winning the fight to keep bars Open

by Toby Lock

01908 651274 [toby.lock@press.ou.ac.uk](mailto:toby.lock@press.ou.ac.uk)  
STUDENTS at the Open University are celebrating after plans to close their campus bars were postponed.

More than 1,200 students and members of staff signed a petition to save the Cellar and Pavilion bars.

Planned cuts to the campus' catering facilities were also objected to.

Last Wednesday, students

and staff held a peaceful sit-in protest, boycotting the catering facilities by bringing in their own lunches.

They then marched to the Pavilion bar for a meeting with university management to discuss their concerns.

Another protest was planned to take place on Tuesday afternoon, but the OU decided to postpone the closure dates from August 1 to the beginning of October for more talks to take place.

Pete Landsberg, who helped organise the protests, said he hoped no more protests are needed to come to a conclusion that all parties can agree with.

He said: "Hopefully this window of opportunity will allow us time to resolve any differences by discussion rather than protest action."

The Citizen approached the Open University for its chance to comment but a response had not been received at the time of going to press.

Printed in the MK Citizen, 21 July 2011

## Fees announcement causes concern

The OU is a £450million a year organisation. In the year 2009-10, (the latest for which figures are available) it received £157m in student fees. In the year 2011-12 the OU will receive £184m from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and around £45m from other funding bodies and from other grants. The OU is financially sound. It has probably put away almost £100m in the last three years. It also has very healthy reserves.

The coalition government is determined to privatise and reduce entry to HE. In the academic year starting in September 2012 the OU is likely to lose a substantial amount of its HEFCE funding. However, we still do not appear to have a clear idea of how much will actually be cut (the OU receives this public funding under a wide array of headings) or what, if any, the transitional funding arrangements will be.

In 2012 we also have to deal with the ELQ policy - well done the last Labour government! - which will prevent many of our existing lifelong learning students accessing a government loan.

Although we do not actually know what the funding cuts will be, the OU Council has already decided that existing students will continue to pay at the current fees level but new students, from September 2012 onwards, will have to pay £2500 per sixty point course. **We do not have access to the OU's research or the calculations on which it based their fees policy.**

**However, we can see that this is a huge 350% increase in fees for new students. This increase could precipitate the OU's collapse.**

**If we pause for a moment and think about our students we have "mainstream" (18-21 year olds), lifelong learners and new entrants. It seems to me that our new fees policy fails to fit any of these groups.**

**We do not offer a campus experience and therefore we will probably not recruit hordes of new "mainstream" students. Moreover, as we are not "mainstream" it is of little use comparing our fees with other HE institutions and saying "we are cheaper". Our lower fees are unlikely to be a big recruiting factor in the UCAS sector.**

Turning to the lifelong learner sector; it is one thing paying £700 a year to study a module for intellectual development and interest and/or to improve your general employability and your career aspirations. It is quite another to do so at £2500 a go. I think a £2500 fee is likely to deter all but the most determined (and well off) of lifelong learners. I think the lifelong learners category makes up the bulk of our 263,000 students.

This leaves us with the fresh, mostly Level 1, batch of students we recruit each year. Many of these students missed out on HE first time around. Lots of these students are doing the introductory module to (a) see if they can do it and (b) see if they like doing it. I suspect that many will do the £2500 cost-benefit analysis and decide they cannot afford to study with the OU. Dipping your toes into the HE waters is one thing at £700 and quite another at £2500. £2500 will be a large part of their disposable incomes. Many of them simply do not have £2500 to spare, and at this level of income debts are really worrying. If they had £2500 lots would probably get a car - not buy an OU course.

So, although the transitional arrangements will probably see us keep more of this and next year's cohort of students I think the numbers will fall off a cliff in September 2012. It could be a catastrophically low intake.

Given the information we have got so far I think these are reasonable assumptions. So, apart from sticking our heads under the covers and hoping it will all go away, what are we going to do about it to save the OU and our jobs?

**For a start, I think we should tell the senior management that it looks like they've got it wrong. If they disagree then they should explain to us (the people who actually make up the OU) why. We should simultaneously demand access to the research and the financial calculations and set up a team of OU academics to devise a better policy (we actually do have the expertise!). We need a more realistic fee policy (and if necessary we should be prepared to spend some of our substantial reserves to get us through the uncertain transitional period).**

Most importantly, we also need a new anti-government HE policy stance. By all means carry on talking to the government and their civil servants but, let us be realistic, talking to people who are trying to privatise and dismantle much of HE is not going to gain the OU many meaningful concessions (up to now can we really claim it has worked well?).

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## ...Fee announcement causes concern continued

Most importantly, we have to work with OUSA to put together an anti-government HE policy campaign. We can win the argument. We also have the expertise, the money and the clout to lead an effective HE sector opposition. I think it will be an uphill struggle - **but it is certainly winnable. Frankly, if I'm right, then what other choices do we have?**

John James, Branch Exec member

See also "Fees & Cuts" on page 13.

## Associate Lecturers and scholarship



That many ALs engage in activities that fulfil the Senate's definition of scholarship should come as no surprise given the nature of the AL job and the values we pass on to our students.

But what about the rest of the AL body?

The senate's definition of scholarship requires "externality", that is, it must produce an output that can be recognised and/or reviewed.

Speaking from a union angle, I realise that the Senate is free to use whatever definition of scholarship it wants for specific purposes, but this must not cross over into contractual matters or override national agreements, and in particular the national Framework Agreement, which Universities & Colleges Employers Association (UCEA)

made with UCU on behalf of its member HE institutions, including the OU.

It can be seen from the national profiles belonging to the Teaching and Scholarship branch of the pay spine, that the obligation to produce published output from scholarship appears justified in the Ac3 profile. At Ac2, the grade ALs are on, the scholarship can be what is necessary to feed into teaching. Good quality teaching is after all a recognisable "output", and an important one at that. The national academic role profiles are at <http://bit.ly/oX3gO2>.

There is also a somewhat fuzzy area for ALs when talking about "peer reviewable" output. The advent of electronic communication led many ALs to publish their tutorial notes and activities in AL conferences where other ALs could make use of them and further elaborate them. This led to some excellent tutorial material being produced on M150, for example, which fed directly into the student experience. Would the Senate recognise this as "output"?

Now some may say that this is just the electronic version of what goes on in many staff rooms. On the other hand it can be said that publishing your tutorial material in written form on a forum for fellow tutors requires more thought than taking part in a verbal discussion in a staff room.

Point 10 in the AL role description at the back of the AL terms and conditions requires ALs "To take part in staff development activities to maintain and enhance their professional experience and commitment to personal development." And the DALs questionnaire asks students to evaluate ALs' knowledge of their subject area as well as of the course material.

In a continually changing world one does not maintain one's knowledge and expertise without committing some amount of time. Obviously we would not expect as much time to be required for maintaining and developing personal knowledge and expertise as would be required by those who are also producing published output, but some time is nevertheless required for the former.

The Senate's definition of scholarship is based on what might reasonably be required at the Academic 3 grade and above, and is also somewhat MK-centric. One could define research in terms of what one would require of a principle investigator and then argue that researchers below Ac3 are not really doing research.

In conclusion, the grades on the national pay spine are based on job analysis, which looks at the demands made on a role. ALs are expected to take hold of courses written by others and make the material their own and present it to students, and furthermore it is usually the most difficult and problematic parts of the course that ALs have to focus on because that is where students need help. One skill that is definitely required for this is scholarship.

Lesley Kane, Hon. Secretary

## Large groups for ALs

Regular readers of Spark will know that we have been campaigning for some time on the issue of tutor group sizes. If you have not seen previous articles on this topic you can catch up by reading the February 2011 <http://tinyurl.com/5t5bb84> and August 2010 <http://tinyurl.com/658nnhn> editions of Spark.

Group size is one of the main parameters used in setting AL salaries so it is dishonest of the university to set salary levels based on a group size of for example 20, and then routinely fill groups to 23 students.

Administrators routinely filling groups up to 129% of standard allocation continues to be a problem in some regions and faculties, as can be seen from the group size reports which are published on our website at [http://ucu.open.ac.uk/associate\\_lecturers](http://ucu.open.ac.uk/associate_lecturers). It is clear that many ALs have had oversized groups for two successive years. For example, the 2010B presentation of AA100 had 98 out of 175 groups in the range 100 -129% and only 37 over 130%. In 2011B 123 out of 184 groups were in the range 100 -129% and only 23 over the 130% threshold where a salary increase is paid. In region 1, in 2010B 22 out of 23 groups were in the 100-129% range and in 2011B 20 out of 23. In general, on large population courses, average group sizes are gradually increasing and ½ to 2/3 of groups are in the range 100 -129% with few over 130%. This suggests that little effort is made to allocate groups big enough to attract a salary increase.

When student numbers look likely to exceed a number that will allow standard size groups to be allocated some managers use a proforma similar to the one I have added to the Branch website under the Group sizes heading ([http://ucu.open.ac.uk/associate\\_lecturers](http://ucu.open.ac.uk/associate_lecturers)), to find out which ALs are willing to take extra students. We believe this should always be done and have asked **the university to make sure that all managers follow this best practice. They have agreed to 'encourage' the use of similar documents.**

UCU can use the group size reports to demonstrate to management that the university is not keeping to agreements about group sizes, but the reports are not available until a couple of months after course starts, which is too late to make a difference to ALs who are overburdened by as many as 7 extra students for no extra pay. The only way to make sure that the university behaves honourably about group allocation is for individual ALs to be aware of how many students they should have in a group, and how many they were allocated in the previous presentation of the course. You should not be allocated a group in the range 100-129% in successive presentations. Where student numbers exceed the number which can be accommodated in standard size groups, managers should try to allocate enough extra students to willing ALs to trigger a salary increase, so that the rest can have a standard group. If you have concerns that these guidelines are not being kept to, please contact UCU at [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) or telephone 01908 6(53069).



Help us make the OU play fair over group sizes this Autumn.

Sue Hawthorne, ALs officer

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## AA307 tutors face a year's unpaid lay off

AA307 is moving to an October presentation just for its final year. One wonders if this was really necessary for one year, since it has resulted in an unpaid lay off for some ALs lasting nearly a year.

**The current AL contract has faults but it isn't actually a zero hours' contract. Any employee facing an unpaid lay off for this sort of time period has a right to be treated as potentially redundant, and these ALs should have been offered the alternative of PC or MOLD status if they did not want to hang around for a year.**

The Arts faculty was less than open with AA307 ALs about their rights until after they had agreed to do the final presentation. We have asked the OU to ensure that any ALs in a similar position are properly informed about their potential options in future. We will also make a case for MOLD status for ALs on any course normally presented every year that goes over to alternate year presentations.

## Casework training

We have now held two successful casework trainings on 17th May and 14th July 2011. We are now running another Casework training session on either 4th, 5th or 11th October 2011 from 10am—4pm. The branch still needs more Caseworkers and all members are eligible to attend. Please phone 01908 6(53069) or email [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) for further information or to book a place. (The training will go ahead on the most popular choice of the three dates above.)

The training session aims to:

- **increase participants' confidence in undertaking the role of the rep/caseworker;**
- Enable participants to progress cases using preparation, negotiation and planning skills;
- Enable participants to refer cases under the UCU legal scheme.



### Objectives

By the end of the session participants will be able to:

- describe the role of the rep/caseworker
- describe the basic principles of employment law
- outline what members can expect from a UCU rep/caseworker
- outline what reps/caseworkers can expect from members seeking support
- describe key techniques that can be used by reps/caseworkers to assess problems
- describe how individual problems can be progressed
- explain how a collaborative approach can be established with members seeking support
- demonstrate interviewing a member
- apply different methods for preparing for meetings with management on individual and collective issues
- identify collective issues emerging from individual problems
- use effective systems to record and store information relating to the representation of members
- describe the UCU legal scheme and make referrals to it
- plan how they will further develop the role and work of reps within the branch.

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## Are you on a fixed term contract with the OU?

Management has agreed to look at the use of fixed term contracts in the OU with us in the autumn.

We would like to hear from anyone, including researchers, who is on a fixed term contract in circumstances that you do not feel justifies it, especially if you have been here for four years or more.

Some members have also raised the lack of transparency that exists over this, and we would also like to hear from anyone who is on a fixed term contract and does not know the reason why they are fixed term.

If any of this applies to you please email [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) with a brief account of your circumstances.

## The power of protest!

What follows is not about the sale of alcohol on campus but about the protests by staff against the failure of management to consult with the stake-holders about closure of the bar service. Also, please remember that the bar provides a short-order food service so that one may order freshly cooked food there.

As many of you are aware, there has been a bar on campus since the early days of the OU. The first, the Cellar Bar, was set up at the suggestion of Jennie Lee, founder of the OU, who got funds from the Nye Bevan Memorial Fund to create a place where staff could socialise. At one time there were four bars running at lunchtimes, providing food in addition to liquid refreshment, but now there is only one.

Unfortunately, in the last few years there have been several attempts to close the bars made by certain

**senior management staff who don't use the service themselves (perhaps because they are fearful of being available to staff in a social context?), and who seem to have an aversion to alcohol being sold on campus. But they are very happy to partake of the generous hospitality provided at high profile events where they invite the guests, such as the 250+ people invited to the Pioneers Day and the naming of the Jennie Lee Building on 19th July 2011. The costs of hospitality are touched upon below. (But wasn't there something strange about celebrating the contribution of Jennie Lee at the same time the OU was trying to end her gift of a bar?)**

On each past occasion when they tried to close the bars, those attempts were beaten back by staff protests because there are precious few facilities on campus for staff to use.

In January this year, four options for Catering Provision were considered, and then one of them was proposed to the Catering Hub Steering Group and this included closing the bar service. In fact every option considered had included closure of the bar service on campus because no alternatives to closure were ever considered. The final proposal was approved by the Estates Committee at the beginning of March.

Despite the VC emphasising the importance of transparency, honesty and trust, his senior managers did not get the message. None of those proposals were discussed with the key stakeholders, the staff, at any time. The OU Club was not consulted, and nor were the unions, and the first they knew about it was at the end of June when they were informed that the bar service would close for good on the 1st August 2011.

The lack of transparency and, indeed, the secrecy on the part of management must have been a strategy since some time last **year because these plans didn't suddenly spring into being at the start of this year. One wonders why they kept this secret ...**

News of this decision caused considerable anger and disappointment amongst many staff because of the lack of consultation over a facility they use, but which senior management do not. A petition was set up, and by the 19th July over 1200 signatures had been collected. The activists involved in creating the petition and leading the protest were from all grades of staff, and some were not union members, as were some of those who signed the petition.

There was a peaceful demonstration outside the Hub, and then inside it, at lunchtime on Wednesday 13th July 2011, followed by a meeting with the Director of Estates and the Director of HR on the cricket pitch beside the Pavilion bar. There were a lot of protestors present and I do not think the Directors enjoyed the experience of being quizzed by them.

We were told the decision was made only on the grounds that the bar service was losing money, and that sales had dropped by 30%. It was pointed out to the Directors that there are many activities on campus which do not make any profit at all, including the sports fields, tennis and squash courts, and the gardens and landscaping. We got acknowledgements that the Hub was repeatedly promoted with special offers and events and that the bar service was not promoted at all. We suggested that they work with us to market and improve the service.

Oddly, requests for the details of the financial information on which the decision was based were, and still are, refused on the grounds that this is commercially sensitive information. I say oddly because the caterers have a monopoly at the OU, and their contract has been renewed for another five years, so how can this be sensitive information?

...continued over



## ...the power of protest continued

The petition was presented to the Vice Chancellor at lunchtime on Tuesday 19th July. He was informed that there was going to be a demonstration at 5pm outside the Jennie Lee Building during the naming ceremony. Mr Bean agreed to meet with some of the activists on the Thursday. Subsequently, that afternoon we were asked by e-mail to abandon the demonstration in view of the agreement to meet with the VC. After an e-mail discussion amongst ourselves, we replied to say we would if they gave us an assurance about taking proper time to consult with the stakeholders. Within minutes the Director of Estates wrote back and told us the closure date was changed from the 1st of August to the 1st of October 2011. As this would give more time to discuss alternatives to closure with management, we agreed to call off the demonstration.

Last week a Freedom of Information request, made a month ago, asking for information about the closure decision, resulted in the activists receiving a copy of the documents considered by the Estates Committee on the 11th March. The second one received by us was a document of financial information with all the figures blocked out!

However, the first one, the Operational Review considered by the Estates Committee, did contain some financial information **about the bar sales but this showed no evidence of the claimed reduction of 30% in takings. In fact the figures (in £'000s) for each year are as follows:**

Year:	Bar:	Hospitality:
2007/8	59,400	661,900
2008/9	60,500	669,700
2009/10	54,800	602,600

During the first two years above, the Hub was being built as was Offices 12, so there were workmen on campus using the bar service in addition to staff. The hospitality figures are included because the caterers charge the OU highly for providing catering for meetings and events. If the OU wants to save money, as alleged, then reduce the expenditure on hospitality.

Discussions with management are ongoing and we are hopeful of retaining the bar service and improving it. At the time of writing the Pavilion bar continues to be busy and well-used. There will be an update on progress when there is some to report.

Protest works! We should do it more often.

John Bennett, Branch Exec member

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## Branch members' survey

We would like to gather information on current issues that are affecting our members, please would you spare less than 5 minutes to complete our online survey at this address: [www.surveymonkey.com/s/OJBUCUissues](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/OJBUCUissues).

All responses are anonymous and the results will not be shared with anyone other than members of the Branch Executive Committee. **As of 4th August 2011, we've only collected 73 responses and would like to get this number up to at least 100!**



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## Colour printed copies of Spark

Our Branch Administrator has a list of people who she sends colour printed copies of Spark to, and they then leave them in common rooms, shared areas or on a notice board—if you have an area where you could leave a copy of Spark then please contact Deb on [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) or 01908 6(53069) or call in to room 015, Wilson C block.

## New courses, more interviewing and selection

**This year it's the turn of MCT's level 1 tutors, mostly from M150 and T175 which are in their last presentation, to go through** application, interviewing, and selection for TU100.

We have previously commented on the amount of work required of ALs undergoing a similar process in other faculties, and this has been no exception. The selection process takes up a huge amount of time from both ALs and regional staff, and inflicts considerable stress and uncertainty on ALs. (No criticism of regional staff is intended here – they did not design the process or the current model of employment for ALs).

**We've had reports from ALs who have wondered whether to prioritise their own need to prepare for interview, or whether to offer a special session to a weak student. Or should one prepare for one's real-life tutorial the next day, or plough through the TU100 development web site in order to be well prepared for interview?**

Clearly an organisation should only inflict this sort of resource-consuming exercise on itself if it is absolutely necessary.

So is all this necessary, and if not why is it done?

The number of ALs with PC or MOLD who are found unsuitable for teaching courses that replace their current courses is generally very small, usually on the fingers of two hands even for the large level 1 courses with hundreds of ALs. In the case of TU100 a couple of hundred appointments are expected.

Even if we were to accept the interviewing and selection process as 100% accurate, which it cannot be in practice, the need to reject (say) nine ALs cannot justify the time and resources used. If about nine ALs are unsuitable to teach the successor course, perhaps a few of them should be guided towards other work more suitable for them, and in a very small number of cases there may be genuine issues of capability.

There are procedures that employers can use to deal with capability or poor performance, and getting about five ALs out of the system every eight to ten years when courses are replaced hardly justifies what several hundred ALs go through in the interviewing and selection process.

**Even for those who are successful, there will have been great effort to no avail if they don't get a group of students in October or February.** In preparation for interview most ALs found it necessary to read considerable chunks of the TU100 material for the pre-interview tasks in marking and live online teaching, and some had to learn how to use Elluminate which takes a lot longer than the OU would like to believe. Many also downloaded SCRATCH and started learning it. In some cases this was the third or fourth programming language they have learned for the OU.

It is some years since the OU ceased, without consulting the union, to pay ALs a reading fee when they take on a new course. Since then, ALs have been expected to do a considerable amount of work for nothing at the start of course life. We believe this is the real explanation, or at least a big chunk of the explanation, for the increasingly complex AL person specs for courses and the interviewing and selection procedures that we have seen over the last few years.

The statistics bear witness to there being no real issue of capability for vast majority of ALs from predecessor courses. But to translate capability into practical ability to teach the course, ALs have to commit considerable time to getting on top of the pedagogy of a new course. If the OU does not pay them for this, how can it ensure that they do this work, if not by an interviewing and selection procedure?



Our criticism of the existing model of AL employment is not just that it is unfair, but that it is irrational and inefficient.

The fact that selection will be going on until the last minute, with appointments only a few weeks before course start, means that TU100 ALs will not be able to collectively discuss the course and exchange ideas about tutorial exercises, online or face-to-face until very close to course start. Anything they prepared for the interviewing and selection process remains the intellectual property of the AL because it was not done as part of their paid work for the OU.

We know of some cases where ALs have been asked for permission for the university to use material they wrote for an interview, but it may well happen that sooner or later there is a dispute over intellectual property.

The fact that the ALs will have remained isolated and not knowing if they are appointed until the last week or two before they get their student groups will inevitably impact on course launch.

The OU UCU branch believes that ALs should be given reasonable notice of whether they are to teach new courses, and treated as partners in the preparation process, and paid something for their time and effort which could then feed ideas into the last stages of course preparation. This will lead to better quality teaching and a better fit between online exercises and tutorials.

Lesley Kane, Hon. Secretary



## Fees and cuts – where does the OU stand?

There are at least three reasons for me to be deeply worried about the level of fees OU students will be expected to pay from next year.

The first is that I am a former OU student, and have two OU degrees, a BA and the MSc in Maths. If I had been faced with next year's fee levels it is unlikely that I would have done either of these degrees, and certainly not both.

The second is that as an Associate Lecturer I am worried about the impact on my employment, and as a UCU member I am worried about the general instability of employment in HE that will be brought about by government policy.

The third is that I am just about old enough to remember the campaigns for the opening of education by a generation of post-war Labour Party and Trade Union members. It was the same generation that campaigned for comprehensive education (i.e. the abolition of the 11+ exam) that also campaigned for the opening of access to higher education. I believe the White Paper, and the Con-Dem government itself, is irreconcilably hostile to that principle.

In its early days the success of the OU, and the excellent reputation it soon acquired, surprised even those who had been involved in establishing it. The nature of its student body was seen as one of the keys to this success. There were other factors too, such as the course team, that is the shared responsibility for courses, but the nature of the OU's student body was always important.

OU students are a highly motivated group of people, balancing work and family, (which for many includes the responsibilities of being the generation in between), with university level study. It is the maturity and dedication of OU graduates that makes them excellent ambassadors for us after graduation.

Any threat to the composition of our student body is a danger to the OU and its reputation as well as to its social mission. I believe the government White Paper constitutes such a threat at a very fundamental level. The ethos of letting the market govern Higher Education is that prospective students have the responsibility of deciding whether it is worth investing in their own futures. Will the money they spend on a degree be justified by higher earnings?

No-one has a crystal ball, and this will be a difficult decision for many eighteen year olds, unless of course they come from rich families. But for someone in their thirties or forties, with caring responsibilities for children and elderly relatives, the balance sheet will inevitably tip the other way for many of them.

It is not uncommon for prospective, and current, OU students to examine their consciences with regard to the time that OU study takes from the family, and if studying is going to take away a significant amount of money from one's family as well it cannot but be a disincentive.

A threshold of £21,000pa is not that high when you have a number of other people economically dependent on you. Those prospective students who are most likely to be adversely affected in this way will often be the type of student who has been a credit to us in the past, and this will include many women students who were planning to return to work better qualified when the children were older.

The OU has always had a particular role in making education available to the disabled, and anyone who has direct contact with disabled students may have an idea what is happening to them. The slashing of independent living budgets, and social support only if a need is "critical" rather than merely "substantial" is not a positive factor if someone is trying to study.

What goes on in Higher Education, (and this applies especially to the OU) is not isolated from what is happening elsewhere in society. Cameron is trying to out-Thatcher the 1980s Thatcher government in carrying out a transfer of wealth and social resources from away from the ordinary people towards the rich. But when this is applied to education it drives a deeper and inter-generational wedge into society than anything else can. What is being done today would have been disowned by a "one nation" Conservative in the past.

A privatised model for Higher Education is being imported from across the Atlantic, but British universities do not have the wealth of institutions like Harvard and Yale. We are not going to get the Ivy League, but we may well get the cowboys out to make a quick buck. See <http://to.pbs.org/bQnwkV> for a US documentary on this kind of operation.

The problem is that it takes time for a cowboy to be recognisable as a cowboy, and in the meantime they will be in competition with us, driving down standards and terms and conditions of employment across the sector.

To some extent the OU case against funding cuts is the same as that of HE generally, but there is also a particular OU case which has not been fully made. Moreover it is the British people, not Cameron and Co who need to hear the case for the OU.

The OU runs throughout the fabric of British society, and is not an organisation that needs to be politically helpless. When faced with a hostile government in the late 1970s and 1980s, it sought widespread support from its students, graduates and Associate Lecturers in every walk of life and of all political viewpoints. Mrs. Thatcher was a realistic enough politician (at least at that stage of her career) to realise that trying to do something serious to the OU was not worth it.

So what of today? On asking why the OU has not opposed the funding cuts we have been told more than once that this would have put the OU "outside the conversation" with the government.

...continued over



## ...Fees and cuts continued

Does this mean that if the OU had campaigned as it did in the 1980s, then the government might have turned a (deliberately ?) deaf ear to arguments on issues affecting the OU, for example that finance should be available at 30 CATS pts a year, for example?

And if so, what does this say about British government and politics (and politicians) today? Things were far from perfect in the 1980s, but at least ministers were advised by senior civil servants who felt responsible for ensuring that ministers were aware of the consequences of decisions, including consequences to non-**standard institutions like the OU**. **Today's politicians are surrounded by think tanks designed to produce a quick fix, and by spin doctors chosen for connections with international media empires.**

Of course we do not criticise the efforts made by the OU leadership to mitigate the consequences of the funding cuts as far as possible. But if this comes at a cost of not being able to oppose funding cuts and privatisation then the OU may pay a high price in the long term.

Amongst other things, the lack of opposition to the massive cuts in funding increase the chances of the damage becoming permanent. If it goes off without protest and no-one really cares, why should any future Labour government, or any other government, reverse it?

Lesley Kane, Hon. Secretary

## Opening the equality dialogue

How important is fairness at work to you?

At the heart of equality is the issue of fairness. This is about race and gender, it is about sexuality and religion, it is about people with disabilities, but it is also about the old, the young, pregnant workers, those who work part-time, and people seeking flexible working arrangements. A fairer workplace is a workplace that is better for everyone.

The Open University is an extremely diverse organisation, and with that diversity comes great strength. At the same time, diversity can create challenges and the UCU wants to work alongside the OU to help address these.

**UCU wants the workplace to be a fair place. Even in good times, things don't always work out that way and people can suffer as a result of inequality.** In harder times, hardship can disproportionately affect those who are the existing victims of inequality. Individuals who are already marginalised are often marginalised further.

At UCU, we are looking to develop a cohort of equality representatives, who are keen and able to make a difference locally. In the meantime, we want to open a dialogue with people across the OU about the issues they are encountering and ideas about how we can make a more just community.

Equality representatives provide advice and support to employees on a range of equalities issues (gender, age, race, disability, sexual orientation, etc) and negotiate with employers. Equality representatives can undertake a wide range of tasks, for example they can:

- Promote equality and diversity issues
- Help employers engage with employees
- Help to carry out equal pay audits
- Be involved in devising a full range of equalities policies
- Help create a more equitable work-life balance which helps workers combine their domestic and work responsibilities (through, say, more flexible patterns of working)
- Ensure that part time and other atypical workers receive fair treatment
- Help employers develop positive action schemes
- Help in performing access assessments for disabled employees.



To find out more about becoming an equality representative, or any other aspect of equality, contact me by emailing [jona-than.jewell@gmail.com](mailto:jona-than.jewell@gmail.com). Full training and support will be provided.

Jonathan Jewell, Equality Officer



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## Your Executive Committee

- President: Roger Walters (r.j.walters)  
Honorary Secretary: Lesley Kane (l.h.kane)  
Honorary Treasurer: David Knowles (d.w.knowles)  
Vice Presidents: Pauline Collins & Bethan Norfor  
Immediate Past President: N/a as Roger Walters  
Equality Officer: Jonathan Jewell  
Central Academic Staff Officer: Sheila Tyler  
Central Academic-Related Staff Officer: Jenny Edwards  
Regional/National Academic Staff Officer: Judy Ekins  
Regional/National Academic-Related Staff Officer: Hilary Partridge  
Associate Lecturers Officer: Sue Hawthorne  
Ordinary Members:  
John Bennett  
Chris Bollom  
Eric Bowers  
Gill Clough  
Axel Hagermann  
Bruce Heil  
John James  
Malcolm Jenner  
Maria McCrea  
Mike McNulty  
**Philip O'Sullivan**  
June Payne  
John Peters  
Peter Piper  
Eric Wade  
NEC Members:  
Alan Carr  
Pauline Collins  
Lesley Kane  
Roger Walters  
Father of NUJ Chapel - vacancy

## 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](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk).

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



Canvas bag



Mouse mat



UCU mug



A6 notepad



Lanyard



Pens



Publicity posters

## Branch meetings

Future scheduled branch meeting dates are as follows:

27th September 2011, 12.30pm in Library Seminar room 1

22nd November 2011, 12.30pm, AGM in the Berrill Lecture theatre—will also be webcast.

