

The Open University branch of UCU

The Spark

Defend your pension rights



Thanks to your magnificent support in the two consultative ballots held to date, the employers are now – at long last – inching towards attempts to settle the USS dispute. For the first time since talks broke down in July 2010, the employers have offered significant concessions – but in two areas only:

- re-joining limits, offering those with breaks in service protection of their pension rights for thirty months rather than a miserly six;
- inflation caps, offering higher and more realistic (though still not quite satisfactory) limits.

There has, however, been no movement as yet on other key areas:

- the “Career Average” proposal, leaving members facing huge six figure pension losses;
- the threat to increase retirement ages, ignoring contractual rights;
- the termination of the right to a full pension from those unfortunate enough to be facing redundancy.

Indeed, **the employers are still refusing to negotiate “at this point” on these and some other slightly less significant issues.**

UCU pressed the Independent Chair to adjourn the last USS Joint Negotiating Committee in the hope that wiser counsels will prevail on the employers’ side. Unlike last time, when the casting vote was used, he did the right thing on this occasion. But hope is not enough. We need to apply some more real pressure to bring the employers back to the table. That is why your vote is so important in the forthcoming USS industrial action ballot.

We need to ask for your vote one more time! A big turn out and a big majority will maximise pressure on the employers to resume serious talks and to negotiate the sensible settlement which is within our grasp. The funding position of USS is even more secure now than it was last July. There is no need for draconian changes to the scheme – or for the damaging and disruptive dispute which will be provoked by any attempt to impose unnecessary cuts to our pensions.

Please vote yes to strike action and yes to action short of a strike. The bigger the majority, the less likely we are to have to deliver action. Every vote counts. Ballot papers should be with you during the week commencing 7th February 2011.

Alan Carr, UCU National Treasurer, UCU Pensions Negotiator and member of the OU UCU Executive Committee

National Dispute

As well as voting to support the union’s fight to defend our pensions, you are also asked to vote YES to strike action and to action short of a strike in the separate ballot on the employers’ failure to engage with the union’s claim for negotiations over an agreement on job security and an end to what amounts in real terms to pay cuts.



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Open University, Browne and the Comprehensive Spending Review

Members will be aware that the Browne report and the Comprehensive Spending Review threaten to remove very large amounts of university funding and that the government expects the shortfall to be met by very substantial increases in fees, both for full time students and part time. The cut in England will be around 80% of the teaching grant currently received. Substantial reductions in research funding are also expected.

The impact in each of the 4 Nations is likely to differ with the separate policies in relation to the funding of HE. However, given that a very high proportion of OU funding is dependent on UK Government policies and delivered through The Higher Education Funding Council for England. The OU response is likely to be primarily driven by this. The curriculum is likely to shift and the student population change.

The supposed sweetener in this enormous shift is that students both full time and part time would be able to access loans to help to pay the fees. Whether our students will accept massive fee increases and loans is very unclear.

Our response as a union branch we believe needs to be twofold:

- Firstly we need to oppose these massive cutbacks through participation in the growing campaign of resistance.
- Secondly we need to defend the unique role of the Open University in widening participation in Higher Education.

The Growing Resistance

The Government wants a sense of inevitability in the cutbacks to prevail. A mood of passive acceptance of the massive cuts in Higher Education and the public sector in general. However, there is a growing mood of resistance as the impact of the cuts both on people and the economy become clear.

Students have led the campaign with the very big November 2010 demonstration in London, further demonstrations around the UK and the wave of college and university occupations that followed. That action has continued into the New Year with further demonstrations in Manchester and London.

There is also a growing trades union campaign with the formation of local anti-cuts bodies in towns and cities across the UK and Trades Union support for the student demonstrations.

The TUC has called a demonstration in London on Saturday March 26 to March for the Alternative. This will assemble at 11am on the Victoria Embankment between Temple Place and Blackfriars and will march to a rally in Hyde Park - for further details see: marchforthealternative.org.uk. This is likely to be the biggest demonstration against a government's social and economic policies since the Poll Tax. The UCU branch will be mobilising for this demonstration and further details will be circulated but please put that in your diary now. Of the many other demonstrations between now and then, the Scottish TUC march in Glasgow on February 26th is probably the most important.



The Threat to Widening Participation

If Browne and the CSR are fully implemented then it is likely that OU fees would need to triple. Students would be able to apply for loans to help pay the fees but there would be entry qualifications and repayment details for working students are not clear.

The impact of a trebling of fees on the behaviour of potential OU students is also very unclear. The University, in a paper to Senate, identifies:

"The key risks relate to the propensity for the part-time market in England, even with additional support for those studying 30 credits or more, to accept the level of fee increases necessary to replace the likely loss of grant funding despite the income contingent nature of the subsequent repayments, particularly as almost 30% of students currently get full grants for their fees."

The University have adopted a strategy for defending the business of the OU through a mix of identifying new student markets, cuts and new income streams. **New younger student "markets" may emerge and are likely to be needed if current student "markets" prove unwilling to pay massively increased fees or do not get the fee waiver currently needed for 30% of our students.** The university will be entering a very uncertain future with a high risk combination of cutbacks, changing student populations and untested alternative income streams.

.../over

...Open University, Browne and the Comprehensive Spending Review

In achieving change with Government policy the University are hoping that further lobbying will win the extra funds needed for widening participation: The Senate paper identifies that:

"Lord Browne proposed the retention of an Access and Success Fund to cover the extra cost of recruiting and supporting students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Government has not (yet) agreed the recommendation and HEFCE funds have been pared back. We are urging Government and HEFCE to allocate funds at 2010/11 levels (£372m) to enable universities to continue to provide additional support to students from the most deprived areas and students with disabilities."

This money is needed if the unique role of the OU in widening participation is to continue. We believe that more than lobbying will be needed if the necessary funding for widening participation is to be won.

In Defence of Widening Participation

The branch executive has recently discussed the need to develop a campaign to oppose the damage that these proposed cuts will do to the OU. It was agreed that this would be crucial for the campaign to involve all sections of the OU community. As indicated above, the University is currently lobbying government to attempt to ensure the survival of the OU. Whether a cabinet of millionaires and ex public schoolboys understand or care about the widening participation agenda of the OU is an open question. Our belief is that there will be a need for a very large scale campaign if the OU mission is to survive.

A small sub group of the Executive is currently working on campaign proposals. The group believes that the focus of this campaign should be defending the social mission of the OU in widening participation. The Open University plays a unique role in creating opportunities for hundreds of thousands of people to access Higher Education who without the OU would not have had that chance. However, the role that the OU has played in society is now under serious threat.

Universities at Risk

A recently commissioned UCU "Universities at Risk" report indicated that the OU is considered at risk of closure. The report indicates that of all the pre 92 universities the OU is most at risk.

http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/t/a/ucu_universitiesatrisk_dec10.pdf

Next Steps

The branch executive believes that our current focus should be on building support for the TUC demonstration on March 26th.

We want to work closely with OUSA and the other OU Trades Unions for the March 26 Demonstration and the campaign in general to ensure a large contingent of both staff and students. We are also working closely with other activists in the OU as indicated elsewhere in Spark.

The branch is holding an open meeting on Monday 28 February at 12.30pm in the Hub Lecture Theatre on "The Open University at Risk?" **Come along to hear more about the threat to the OU's social mission.**



The new OU branch banner on its first outing at the Fund our Future demo, November 2010

Default Retirement Age

The University has still not decided when it will abolish the default retirement age (DRA) but it is understood that the Council will make a decision on this at its next meeting on 1st March 2011.

It is looking increasingly probable that the OU will delay abolishing the DRA until 1st October when it is almost certain that legislation will require it to do so. This will enable the University to oblige about 60 internal staff and an unknown number of ALs to retire on 30 September 2011 - the annual normal retirement date for internal staff- just the day before it will become illegal to do so.

Since the OU is deeply committed to ending discrimination and, to its credit, committed to the abolition of the DRA by 2011 long before the prospect of any legislation on this, it is deeply regrettable that the University intends to continue to practice age discrimination by enforcing a default retirement age until the last possible moment.

Discussions with the University are in hand about the position of those ALs who may be obliged to retire between the time of a decision on abolition of the DRA and its implementation, UCU is pressing for them to be treated as current staff for the purposes of being able to apply for jobs otherwise restricted to current staff.



AL Workload Guidelines

UCU are delighted that the OU has agreed to revise the guidelines on AL workload which prevented any AL from teaching more than 180 points if they had no other employment, or less if they worked elsewhere as well as for the OU. The previous strict limits have been replaced by guidelines which allow staff tutors more discretion. They have been in operation for a few months and our feedback is that staff tutors are pleased with the new arrangements and feel they are working well. ALs who have been able to take on extra work are also pleased, though I am sure very busy. You can read about the new guidelines at http://www.open.ac.uk/tutors/employment-info/pages/recruitment/invitation_to_apply.htm

The "formal performance related issues" referred to in the third bullet point means formal disciplinary procedures, which are very rare.

Sue Hawthorne, ALs Officer

If you are on a Fixed Term Contract the following applies to you: -

The end of a fixed term contract is a dismissal in law, and in most cases a redundancy.

This means that the employer has an obligation to consult both you and the union that represents your category of staff in the OU, and to avoid redundancy by redeploying you to any alternative work in the OU that is suitable for you. All redeployment opportunities university-wide should be considered and (within reasonable limits) training provided. Under OU procedures this process must start at least six months before your contract ends, so no head of unit or line manager should be telling fixed term staff that their employment will cease until all procedures have been gone through.

They cannot treat you less favourably than comparable staff on permanent contracts unless they have a valid objective justification.

This can include selection for redundancy simply because you are on a fixed term contract. And any redundancy process that applies to fixed term staff should not be less favourable than that afforded to permanent staff.

If you have been continuously employed on fixed term contracts for four years or more with at least one renewal you can request confirmation that you are now permanent under regulation 8 of the Fixed Term Employees Regulations.

The employer can offer an objective justification for not accepting that you are permanent, but the Ball case has established that external funding is no longer a blanket justification for keeping staff on fixed term contracts. If you are covering for staff absence then the employer may have a valid justification, but it may still be worth looking at the circumstances.

Lesley Kane, Branch Hon. Secretary

Campaign launched to reclaim UCU

A group of members of the UCU National Executive Committee have launched a campaign entitled "Reclaim The Union." This follows divisions within the NEC, which have been widely reported in the press including the THE, and which, in the view of the campaign's supporters, "have been created by the sectarian behaviour of the Socialists Workers Party - SWP, which **dominates and controls the grouping in the UCU known as "UCU Left."**

Actions which have contributed to the divisions in the NEC include public and offensive attacks on UCU staff which led to a formal complaint by a large group of staff, and pushing motions through the NEC to support fringe groups which have publicly attacked the National Union of Students and to support a march organised by small groups in London on the same day as a demonstration in Manchester jointly organised by the TUC and the NUS which focussed on the appalling rise in youth unemployment. General Secretary Sally Hunt characterised these motions as viewing the NUS and other **trade unions "as little more than appendages to UCU's grand strategy** which seems to be directed by bodies outside UCU rather than our own members."

NEC members who support this campaign, which has been launched by the Independent Broad Left group on the NEC, include Roger Walters, President of OU UCU, Pauline Collins, one of the Vice Presidents of the branch, and Alan Carr, another leading member of the branch who is also the national Treasurer of UCU.

For further details of this campaign and especially if you want to become an individual supporter, email reclaimUCU@gmail.com

Potential Redundancy situations

The University Council in November declared potential redundancy situations in three areas of the University:

- FELS in relation to staff based in English regions who support the PGCE, as a result of the imminent withdrawal of funding by the Teaching and Development Agency;
- CHERI, the Centre for Higher Education Research and Innovation, which is based in London and which the University is to close and
- Student Services as a result of the restructuring of the management of Student Services and in particular the ending of Regional Director posts in English regions.

Extensive discussions with the staff directly involved and with UCU are ongoing but it is now almost certain that there will be no compulsory redundancies though a number of the affected staff will be taking voluntary severance.

Pay cut imposed

The University, along with virtually all other university, has decided to impose a 0.4% salary increase although UCU has **rejected the employers' final offer of 0.4%**. This is well below the current level of inflation so represents a pay cut in real terms for the second year running. The increase will be backdated to 1st August 2010 and will be made in February salary payments.

Research Staff Titles

Following protracted discussions with the University, agreement has been reached around the titles of research staff in a way which safeguards career progression for research staff.

OU Activists group formed

A number of staff, students and alumni have formed a group known as "OU Activists" to oppose the damaging cuts in higher education. This group includes a number of UCU members but is entirely autonomous and independent of the union. However the OU UCU welcomes the foundation of this group and looks forward to working with them and others in a broad campaign to oppose cuts in higher education in general and the OU in particular. We therefore invited a member of this group to write about it for Spark, see below.

"OU Activists" is a broad autonomous coalition of Open University staff, students and alumni, founded in the aftermath of the November 2010 anti-HE Cuts demonstrations, with the aim of providing a platform by which those associated with the Open University can oppose the damage currently being inflicted on Higher Education.

We believe that the foundation of the Open University represented a historic commitment to free, egalitarian education for all. Therefore we want to ensure that the Open University is at the forefront of opposition to education fees, budget cuts, and privatisation.

We recognise that the dispersed nature of the Open University student body poses challenges for political organisation and activism, and we intend to discuss how to overcome these difficulties and turn the situation to our advantage.

Since we are not confined by an enclosed campus, but move continually between the world of work and study, we are in a unique position to realise the common factors uniting students and the broader movement for social, political and economic justice. Thus we are also dedicated to the defence and expansion of social welfare in general.

There are over 250,000 students, 7,000 tutors, 3,500 support and admin staff and 1,200 academic staff at the Open University – together, we will be a powerful force!

We have a blog at ouactivists.wordpress.com to which we invite contributions. If you want to join us, or just get in touch, our e-mail address is ou.activists@gmail.com. We also have a Facebook group entitled "Open University Students, Staff and Alumni against Fees and Cuts".

Mark Scully, PhD student & UCU member



**SUPPORT YOUR UNION
VOTE YES TO ACTION!**

The Union's welfare function

One of the most important functions of the union is to support the interests and welfare of individual members by providing basic advice or information on their rights. We provide casework training for this, and it takes place at the Walton Hall campus, though we can arrange for it to be held elsewhere when necessary. The training requires one day only, and the University permits paid time-off for this purpose. Once you are trained, you would not be expected to give us any more time or effort than you feel comfortable with.

As stated above, the actual support required would be to provide basic advice or guidance about the rights of our membership. The information necessary for this would be provided by us. Any contact with you would be made first by an approach from Deb Shann, our Branch Administrator, to ask if you have the time to answer a query from a member of staff. If you did not have time, then she would ask someone else.

Rest assured that you would not be expected to deal with anything difficult or controversial. Your function would be to listen to the person who is referred to you and to offer them advice or guidance on basic employment matters. If you are anxious or unsure about what is asked, then you would be able to contact a more experienced person for assistance.

Similarly, **should it transpire that the member's issues are far more difficult than anticipated**, then you refer the matter back to Deb Shann, and she will pass it to an experienced case-worker. As you develop in experience, you may wish to volunteer to take on more complex enquiries, and perhaps move on to handling personal cases where a member may require more active assistance or interventions, such as representation and accompaniment to meetings with management. We provide support and assistance for this as well, and would give you a seasoned caseworker to shadow, and that person would be your mentor.

We hope the above will be of interest to you, and that you will feel enthused to sign up for training. If you are, then please let Deb Shann know, and a training day will be arranged. If you want more information, let her know, and she will put you in touch with one of the experienced caseworkers and that person will be happy to talk about this with you, and provide further details of what is involved.

The reason we are seeking more volunteers for training is that our most experienced caseworkers and advisors are retiring soon. Before they go we need to ensure that there is a pool of advisors and caseworkers available to take on the welfare work we do so well at present.

To contact Deb: call in at room 015, Wilson C block, Walton Hall or phone 01908 6(53069) or email ucu@open.ac.uk

John Bennett, Branch Casework Manager



Elections to UCU National Executive Committee

Elections are currently taking place to the UCU National Executive Committee. OU branch members can vote in five elections - for a Vice President who will subsequently become the National President, for a representative of disabled members, for a representative of LGBT members, for four UK elected members from HE, and for three regionally elected members from HE. All UCU members whose prime branch is the OU have a vote in the South constituency regardless of where you actually live.

All branch members are encouraged to read the election statements of the candidates carefully and to cast your vote accordingly. The more members who vote, the more representative the NEC will be of the membership.

UCU election rules preclude any campaigning for any particular candidates in the Spark or through the use of UCU mailing lists. Some leading individual members of the branch will be campaigning for some candidates and would be happy to offer advice to any member who requests this. If you wish to seek advice you should email someone individually and not the branch mailbox.

UCU Environment Conference—November 2010

On November 18th 2010 UCU environmental activists from across the UK met up for the 2nd annual environmental conference on the theme of Sustainable Development (SD) —Making our Voice heard. George Bell participated on behalf of the OU Branch. The general context of the conference was to get an update on the latest development from UCU green activists and to use the day as an opportunity to help set the sustainability agenda for the next year.

In the welcome and opening address by Sally Hunt, UCU General Secretary, Sally reminded delegates of the importance of the ongoing campaign and cuts in FE/HE and the threat to the sustainability of the quality of Higher Education in the UK. Sally **was followed by Frances O'Grady the TUC Deputy General Secretary**, who highlighted the stake that trade unions have in promoting a low carbon economy. This was followed by a question and answer session exploring three key areas where we need to make a difference to the environment: Campus, Curriculum and Community. The need for branches to take up the challenges in these areas was the theme of the three conference workshops. Also debated were National issues, where UCU activists need to influence the national agenda. **When the Coalition government claims to be the "greenest government ever" six months down the line, where is the evidence they are delivering on their pledge?** At an International level after the failure of the Copenhagen conference, activists and trade unions need to put pressure on the international community to meet the challenge of climate change at the Cancun conference. A panel discussion set the agenda for the debates inside the workshop sessions on Greening the campus, curriculum and community.

Key note speakers were:

- Professor Bill Scott, University of Bath –Chair UK/NC OF UNESCO ESD Co-ordinating Group
- Liz Hutchins, Friends of the Earth
- Louise Hanzan, Climate Change Campaigns Manger - People and Planet

The afternoon was spent in small facilitated groups which reported back to a final plenary session chaired by Graham Peterson UCU Environment Co-ordinator. Summary and recommendations for future policy areas were developed after questions and answers on the workshop feedback.

UCU Green Organization Strategy

Branch level: Target of at least one green rep in every branch; link green issues to recruitment campaigns, regular reports to Branch meetings, liaison with UCU Safety Reps, establish site based action groups and circulate the outcome of UCU Environmental Conferences.

National level: Activists to continue raising profile within all levels of UCU, regional meeting to be organised for green activists, more green Rep training, circulation of UCU publications, encouragement of use of UCU website resources, raise issues at National Congress and connect with Educational International.

Green Campus Strategy

Review the opportunities for joint work with NUS, Students, Management and People and Planet groups. In relation to management it is important to identify who has the institutional Sustainable Development [SD] role and obtain details of SD related policies. Focus on key institutional SD concerns such as: energy management, corporate investment, procurement, waste, water, bio-diversity, transport and food. Check membership of the Environmental Association for Universities & Colleges (EAUC). Recognize the importance of the Green Rep. role.

Green Curriculum Strategy

Carry out a curriculum audit to identify current policy and institutional provision, include behavioral (soft) and hard SD and integrate into CPD and all staff events. Liaise with Institutional TU Learning Reps to establish priority areas such as staff and student inductions. Identify existing internal and external resources to adapt and link to institutional environmental management practice. UCU to establish and disseminate guidance in specific SD programme areas.

Green Community strategy

Support UCU's "Green and Decent Jobs" pilot project with TUC Greenpeace Friends of the Earth and IPPR. Establish the possibilities for expanding community engagement. Explore opportunities within local authorities. Campaign with other connected institutions in FE/HE, local employers, schools, TUC Councils and campaign against Climate Change - NGOs e.g. Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth groups. Develop opportunities presented by Feed in Tariff (FIT), Renewable Heat Incentive and CRC Energy Efficiency Scheme. There are 3 videos from the UCU Environmental conference on the UCU website at <http://bit.ly/hrfL64>

George Bell



Large Groups for Associate Lecturers

In the August 2010 edition of SPARK I wrote an article outlining how the university was exploiting arrangements designed to allow some flexibility on group size, to save money on the tuition salary bill. See <http://bit.ly/f2TOSo> if you want to catch up. In brief, the university is for some courses and in some regions allocating all groups in the 100-129% range instead of giving ALs who are willing to take extra students (over 130%) a group large enough to trigger a salary increase. As they have been pursuing this policy for over a year many ALs who teach on 2011B course presentations are now being given a group in the range 100-129% for the second year running. Our agreement is that the university will not give individual ALs groups in this range year on year, so ALs who are in this position may be entitled to refuse to take more than the standard allocation of students.

At the end of January I was contacted by an AL who had been allocated 18 students and who had 19 students last year. The standard group size for the course in question is 15. The AL had contacted his staff tutor and asked to be given a standard size group, but was told that it was now university policy to fill groups to 129%. I wish to be clear that the staff tutor is wrong; this is not the university policy. The guidance issued to administrative staff is that they should enforce the module standard tutor:student ratio because module teams determine the appropriate group size for good pedagogic as well as financial reasons; and for high population modules and modules with no face-to-face tuition, to allocate groups in the range of 105-110%. This means an additional student for modules with ratios of 16:1 or less and two additional students for modules with ratios of 20:1 or more. UCU do not find it acceptable to give an AL any extra students unless it is unavoidable, but this is a long way from a universal policy of filling groups to 129%.



This is not an isolated example. I gave several other instances in my previous article on this subject, but here are some more. The standard group size for AA100 is 15. For the 2010J presentation of AA100 in Region 5, 17 out of 18 groups were in the 100-129% range, the other one was over 130%. The average group size was 18, so there is no way this was only one extra student for each AL. In Region 2 for the same course and presentation 3 groups out of 31 were at 100%, the rest were in the range 100-129%. The average group size was 17.6, so again this is about 18 students for the majority of ALs in the region. DD101 also has a standard group size of 15. In 2010J in Region 9 17 out of 21 groups were in the range 100-129%, and none big enough to attract a salary increase. The average group size was 16.5. As two of the remaining 3 groups were below 100%, this again represents about 18 students for the majority of ALs in the region. All these examples are taken from the group size reports for 2010J which are published on the UCU website at http://ucu.open.ac.uk/associate_lecturers.

It has been pointed out to me that these spreadsheets are not user friendly. Yes, I agree. They are not produced by UCU but by the university, for management purposes, and contain a lot of data. However, most ALs are only interested in a small fraction of that data. If you wish to check what is happening on your courses in your region and are struggling, drop me an email at ucu@open.ac.uk and I will try to help out.

It is clear from the group size reports and correspondence with other ALs that the staff tutor who told an AL that it was now university policy to fill groups to 129% is not an isolated example. At the end of January I therefore emailed all our AL members to alert them to this and suggested they ask questions if they were allocated a group in the range 100-129% in 2011B for the second year running. Unfortunately, about half of the emails bounced, a problem apparently caused by the recent changes to AL email addresses, so if you did not receive my email I can only apologise and assure you that our administrator is working hard to fix the problem.

Management has complained that this email was inflammatory and unhelpful. Our view is that if group allocation is being done fairly and in accordance with agreements there should be no problem. By the time the 2011B group size reports come out in a couple of months it will be too late to fix. It is not the business of a trade union to collude with management in making what is effectively a pay cut to many of our members. AL terms and conditions state that an AL **"may be required by the University to take on students up to 129% of the recommended tutor:student allocation per course for a presentation. There remains, however, the overall endeavour for each presentation that group sizes should conform as far as practical with the Central Academic Unit Guidelines."** We believe that the university is not always making the overall endeavour for each presentation to allocate groups that conform as far as practical with CAU guidelines, and we hold to our view that this is a breach of contract.

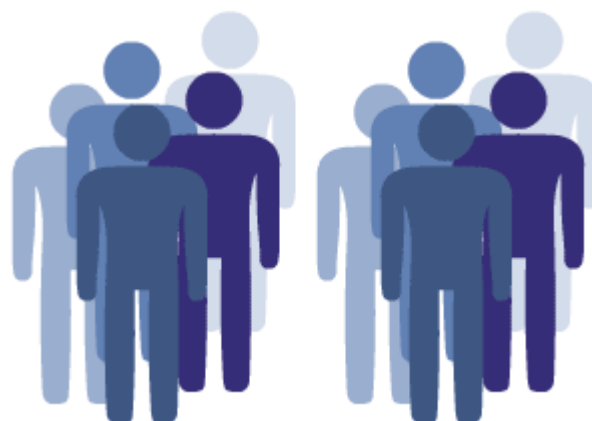
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...Large Groups continued

The evidence is there in the group size reports. Of course we understand that student numbers do not always fit neatly into standard size groups, which is why there are agreements to allow some flexibility, and why it is difficult for individual ALs to know if the OU is being fair to them.

In the main this has arisen because student numbers are rising. This is generally good news for ALs so the downside that they are not being paid more to teach them is unfortunate. Other means the university has employed to increase average group sizes include not replacing ALs who resign or are forced to retire, even though students numbers remain the same; dividing the numbers up to their advantage when an AL has appointments to teach two groups on the same course; choosing to make more ALs redundant from a course than is strictly necessary when student numbers fall; and moving students to other regions when one region has too many for the available ALs even though they all have large groups. This last is at odds with the university's claims to have the welfare of students at heart.

OU management say that they need to save money. We are well aware of government policies, but see this as an excuse and in any case irrelevant. The university cannot use finances to make un-negotiated changes to AL terms and conditions. They also argue that other staff are being squeezed and ALs should bear a share of the pain, while at the same time claiming that ALs are being protected from the main effects of the cuts. I do not dispute that other staff are being asked to take on more, and UCU is fighting this when it can. However, AL workload is directly linked to student numbers, and because of this group sizes are one of the main drivers in setting salary levels. It is dishonest of the university to set a salary based on a group size of say 20, and then seek to make groups of 25. It is not in the interest of students for ALs...



to cut corners, nor in the long-term interests of the university, which depends on high levels of student satisfaction in order to continue to attract new students. Moreover, now that CDSA for ALs is on the agenda it is not in the professional interest of ALs to deliver substandard student support. In an establishment unit, when workload increases because staff leave and are not replaced, managers can make decisions to prioritise the most important work. This cannot be done for ALs, and we see this argument as an attempt to create divisions between different groups of employees, which should be resisted. We need to stick together at this difficult time.

Many ALs have other employment and/or caring commitments, so the time they have available for their AL work has to be carefully worked out. We know of experienced ALs who have chosen to resign rather than risk having 5 extra students for no extra pay, and being forced to deliver what they see as a second rate service to students. Others complain to us but are afraid to take it up with their staff tutors. Some have extra students on several courses at the same time. This is a grey area from the point of view of agreements, but we know of ALs who have managed to negotiate standard size groups on some courses because they already have other over size groups, so if you do have a good relationship with your staff tutor this is worth a try. Another concern, which has been brought to my attention, is that an AL may have students with a long list of additional requirements. Such students can bring a great deal of extra work, so this should be taken into account when allocating students. We know that many staff tutors have been unhappy with instructions to increase group sizes, and have done their best to minimise the effects on ALs, and we are grateful for their support. Increasingly, administrators who know nothing about the ALs personally, and little about their work, are doing group allocation.

UCU don't want ALs to get into confrontations with line managers over group sizes if it can be avoided, so get in touch with us for advice if you have any worries at all. We think that loading ALs up to the maximum is very short sighted, and bad for morale. ALs often have other employment and hence some choice over who they work for. They are not going to choose the OU if they feel that they are being squeezed till the pips squeak.

Sue Hawthorne, ALs Officer

Is your PC or laptop insured?

One dark December evening at about 5pm I opened my front door and got a feeling something was wrong. The house was cold and there was an intermittent tinkling sound which I soon traced – one of my back patio doors had been smashed with a brick and my laptop, which I had left in the kitchen after an eTMA marking session, was gone. Oh well, I thought, **at least I'm fully insured with a reputable**, household name insurance company (Lloyds TSB).

But later when I confirmed on the phone that I did indeed use my computer at least partly for professional purposes, as any AL working with the OU must now do, I was horrified to learn that it was therefore not insured. So I would advise all ALs (and any other staff who ever use their personal computer for any work related reason) to check their insurance policy.

Hilary Partridge, OU UCU Exec Member

Sue Hawthorne OU UCU ALs Officer adds:

My home insurance is currently with Directline, and when I checked my policy document I found what appeared to be an exclusion of **"items held or used for any profession, business or employment"**. This could include quite a lot of computer equipment, so I phoned Directline to check. I was assured that in spite of this, there is another clause somewhere which says that I do have cover for business computers up to £5000 – **I haven't managed to find this**, but as my phone call is now on record I am prepared to believe it. Insurance is clearly a bit of a minefield when you work from home, **so Hilary's advice to check your cover is sound**. We would be interested to hear from any AL who has had claims refused like Hilary, or has trouble getting cover and/or is asked to pay an extra premium.



Branch meetings

We used the OU's Flash meeting tool to web-cast the extraordinary Branch meeting on 2nd February 2011, to watch the replay of the meeting go to: <http://oufm.open.ac.uk/fm/76b4c6-2686>

Future branch meeting dates are as follows:

28th February 2011, 12.30pm in the Hub Lecture theatre, **Open meeting "the Open University at risk?"**

9th March 2011, 12.30pm in Library Seminar room 1

4th May 2011, 12.30pm in Christodoulou meeting room 15

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

22nd November 2011, 12.30pm, AGM in the Berrill Lecture theatre



UCU Support Centre

UCU has launched a support centre page for members where they will find answers to many of the most common queries received, together with other useful material to inform and support them in their employment and union membership.

The information on the site is general in nature and not intended to be relied on for specific casework. The opinions or views expressed in this site are not necessarily those of UCU. If members need specific to resolve an employment related dispute, we advise that they continue to contact their branch for advice as the main intention of the guide is to assist members with general information.

To access the website, please go to: <https://ucu.custhelp.com/>



UnionLearn Conferences, November 2010

UnionLearn had two conferences in November 2010 to promote its activities. Nationally UnionLearn has trained and accredited 2,500 union learning reps (ULR), and has seen 800,000 workers follow **courses identified by ULR's working with TUC and employers**. There are now over 1000 recognised workplace learning centres and over 1500 learning agreements have been signed by employers.



The ULR has two main roles. Firstly to negotiate education and training provision with employers, (including developing learning agreements), and providing information to workers on education and training opportunities. This includes TUC/Trade Union courses, general education, and specific training.

The UnionLearn initiative has had particular success in the public sector. Attendance at the Cambridge conference (taken from the attendance list) was 73% public sector, 27% private sector. There has been little activity within the teaching unions. At Cambridge only UCU were represented, and one of the two UCU delegates failed to attend due to the weather conditions.

Minor teaching union ATL has tried to develop ULR's and claims particular success in improving assessments and staff training opportunities through establishing learning agreements which included these activities.

Where they exist, the ULR plays an equivalent role in the branch to a H&S rep. They take on a specialist activity within the union branch. **Typically ULR's are relatively young**, and this may also be an opportunity to encourage new activists. Over 50% of **current ULR's also have other roles in their union branch.**

Should OU UCU have a ULR? Clearly that is an issue for the branch. It might be a useful role with an opportunity to engage in developing CDSA and other opportunities for OU staff. Maybe we should have an internal champion to encourage more take up of TUC courses, as well as UCU courses? There are already issues in these areas which fall on the branch negotiating committee, who already have more than enough to do.

Who could do this activity? Ideally it might be a young activist with plenty of time and ability to get to Milton Keynes regularly. It might currently be a useful time for someone (or more than one person) to engage with this area given the current rolling out of CDSA etc. to all staff, and also the need to train and accredit more UCU caseworkers. It could be a big job, and any learning agreement should provide paid time for the ULR to carry out their activities. There are TUC courses to train and **accredit ULR's.**

John Robson, AL Rep for the East of England

New Exec members, 2010-11

Following the Branch elections in November 2010 we are very pleased to welcome several new members to the Executive Committee:



Sheila Tyler of OUBS, Walton Hall joins as Central Academic Officer. (pictured left)

Lynne Connolly of CIC, Manchester regional/national centre joins as Regional Academic-Related Staff Officer.

Philip O'Sullivan of Social Sciences, Belfast joins as an Ordinary member.

Axel Hagermann of the Faculty of Science, Walton Hall joins as an Ordinary member. (pictured left)



Hilary Partridge of Student Services, Manchester regional/national centre joins as an Ordinary member. (pictured left)

There are photos and short biographies of most of the OU UCU Officers and Exec members on the branch website: http://ucu.open.ac.uk/branch_committee

Vacancies in our Branch



Executive Committee: there is a vacancy for an Equality Officer on the branch Exec Committee.

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. At the moment, the only duty you would be asked to do is to put up posters/publicity in the centre.

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

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 OU UCU
 Room 015 Wilson C Block,
 The Open University,
 Walton Hall,
 Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
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 email: ucu@open.ac.uk
 Web: www.ucu.open.ac.uk



Need help?

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

Crossword solution— November 2010 issue

Across	Down
2. Mug	1. Austrian
3. Scotland	4. The Shadows
5. Wellington	6. Currency
7. Umbra	11. Octagon
9. Cedar	12. Bird
10. Robben (island)	14. Hari Kiri
13. Northern Lights	15. Pink
18. Kidney	16. Jupiter
19. Alaska	17. Charles Pinfold
20. Harrods	21. Piano
22. Machiavelli	23. Botany
24. Entomology	
25. Diamond	

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: vacancy
 Central Academic Staff Officer: Sheila Tyler
 Central Academic-Related Staff Officer: vacancy
 Regional Academic Staff Officer: Judy Ekins
 Regional Academic-Related Staff Officer: Lynne Connolly
 Associate Lecturers Staff Officer: Sue Hawthorne
 Ordinary Members:

John Bennett	Maria McCrea
Chris Bollom	Mike McNulty
Eric Bowers	Philip O'Sullivan
Gill Clough	Hilary Partridge
Axel Hagermann	June Payne
Bruce Heil	John Peters
John James	Peter Piper
Malcolm Jenner	Eric Wade

NEC Members:

Alan Carr
 Pauline Collins
 Lesley Kane
 Angie McConnell
 Roger Walters

Father of NUJ Chapel - vacancy

November 2010 branch election results are now available on the branch website at: http://ucu.open.ac.uk/branch_committee

**SUPPORT YOUR UNION
 VOTE YES TO ACTION!**