

The Open University branch of UCU
www.ucu.open.ac.uk

The Spark — February 2014



Open letter to Martin Bean, Vice Chancellor

Dear Martin

In December 2013 the *Telegraph's* reporting of your 11% pay increase at a time University Staff received 1%, angered staff at the Open University. In an attempt to justify this increase the OU's director of communications stated that in 2010 you "...had voluntarily taken a 10% pay cut for 2 years at a time of financial uncertainty" and the University Council's Remuneration Committee decision was to restore this. (*Snowball, Jan. 2014*) However, there has been no such restoration of the 13% real terms pay cut forced upon hardworking, dedicated University staff over the last 4 years. Instead, we have had the imposition of an insulting 1% and the refusal of UCEA, the employers' representatives, to discuss an improved offer.

The Open University, like many other universities, is no longer in a position of financial insecurity but facing a more stable financial future. Indeed, you acknowledge this in your January podcast and the latest reported figures from HESA showed that the sector has over £1 billion in operating surpluses with many institutions building up cash reserves over recent years.

Our members are steadfast in their determination for fair pay. Whilst our campaign is primarily about a fair deal for University staff, it is also about our students and quality HE. UK higher education has a great international reputation and student surveys consistently show that staff are providing a high quality service, with the Open University in the top 5. Yet the very people who make our universities great have seen their pay cut by 13% over the last four years. Although fair pay is an issue of fairness in itself, there are very clear benefits to students when pay is at a level which attracts excellent staff, and helps to support the maintenance of a valued and motivated workforce. University staff however, are being asked to work harder for less pay year after year.

This is not acceptable. In your January address to Open University staff you acknowledge their hard work and dedication "...which made 2013 a year to remember for all the right reasons." It is imperative therefore, that you not only do right by doing all in your power to improve the derisory 1% pay offer, but to be seen to be doing right. We are now aware that UCEA and UCU have agreed to investigate, with the other parties to the new JNCHES, the prospect of arranging exploratory talks, involving all the new JNCHES unions, prior to the first scheduled negotiating meeting of the 2014-15 pay negotiations. We understand that the purpose of the exploratory talks would be to seek an early positive dialogue on the key issues in the lead up to the 2014/15 pay round.

UCU therefore asks that you publicly state your support for these exploratory talks and to an improved offer that will begin to address the systematic and intentional erosion of our pay. We look forward to a positive response.

Open University Branch of UCU

Docked strike pay

The UCU Branch has agreement from HR that pay docked for strike action will be donated to the University Financial Assistance Fund.



A date has been announced for the start of a marking boycott in the HE pay dispute: 28 April 2014. See update on the UCU HE pay dispute on page 4.

UCU information on the marking boycott:
<http://fairpay.web.ucu.org.uk/instructions-for-the-marking-boycott/#.Uw4PHIOlLct>

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Academic and Research Staff Promotions Scheme

In November UCU raised the issue of our exclusion from the consultation on the proposed changes to the Academic and Research Staff Promotions Scheme with management. We reminded them that the Framework Agreement states that “progression of staff to a higher grade will be on an equitable and transparent basis, the details of which will be developed in partnership between HE institutions and their recognised trade unions.” We made it clear that failure to consult UCU on proposals that have such a far-reaching effect on the academic life of this University, and our members, was unacceptable. ‘Principles and Procedures under which promotion, additional increments and moves beyond efficiency bars are made (subject to powers of Senate)’ are negotiable. Feed-back from members formed the collective response submitted by UCU. The tight timescale for responses did not allow time to debate the issues. The submission from UCU could therefore only highlight some of the key concerns raised by our members, which will require further discussion. **UCU therefore requested a full, recognisable, process of negotiation in good faith with a view to reaching agreement.**



Below are a few key points from the collective response from UCU

Whilst the commitment to a more transparent system, quality feed-back and the expressed intention to provide a fairer and more transparent method of selecting candidates for promotion is welcome, there is concern that this may be undermined by the serious issues and flaws identified by our members which could have unintended consequences and result in a detrimental impact.

UCU also welcomed the commitment in principle to flexibility but stated that it is far from clear how this would be applied. Equality should be at the heart of any staff promotion scheme. UCU is concerned that these proposals will be detrimental to the progress of women and other equality groups. Further barriers are unacceptable and an Equality Impact Assessment was requested as a matter of urgency.

Titles - Whilst UCU is aware that a few universities in the UK are using the ‘Associate Professor’ title, there is some concern as to how widespread and compatible this term is within the sector in the UK. We are also concerned about the effect that such a change would have on those wishing to progress to other institutions. Academic role profiles need to be clear and to read across to the nationally recognised role profiles. Roles need to be clearly defined in order to clearly demonstrate step changes between grades. It is not clear where the role of Associate Professor maps on to the existing career structure and therefore UCU recommended that this be investigated further.

Approach to assessment - It is clear that this requires a more balanced approach and parity of esteem. UCU believe that it is essential for the OU to encourage all academic staff to develop rounded careers that fully integrate teaching, research and knowledge exchange. Our members are concerned about the dangers associated with dividing the academic community into two tracks, teaching and research. There is also concern that these proposals could exacerbate gender difference. Consequently, an inadvertent outcome of these proposals could be the shutting down of opportunities for women to develop and progress their careers within the wider academic community.

Clarity of the criteria - Members have raised a number of points in this regard highlighting the importance of objective criteria, which is not formulaic, for determining ranking. Career paths differ and many will not fit the “standard”. It is essential that this ensures a fair means of assessment with clarity in application and feed-back. UCU is therefore concerned with the reliance on a tick list in assessing promotion cases, whilst downgrading the exercise of judgement. A scheme that is too rigid and inflexible will take little account of diverse environments, different disciplines and subject areas. Some flexibility is required. The criteria therefore need to be valid, universally applicable and susceptible to objective measurement.

Leadership and management - UCU is concerned about the ill-defined ‘leadership’ requirement and emphasises the need to recognise both academic leadership and leadership through management and admin. Also, from an equality perspective it is important that opportunities for leadership are made available to all staff on an equal basis. There is therefore a need for structures to be built in to ensure that women get the opportunity to take on appropriate roles, are appropriately mentored and that their achievements are visible and acknowledged. Promotions panels need to be aware of gendered leadership and measures to prevent unconscious bias should be put in place.

Use of Norms in the criteria - Opportunities to achieve these must be clearly embedded in CDSA practice, ensuring fair and effective distribution of ‘contributions across the roles’.

Research - the use of research income norms is likely to be problematic in terms of a level playing field. **Teaching** - HEA Fellowships - UCU would encourage a more holistic approach, so that HEA requirements are integrated into academic career development from the probation stage onwards, rather than representing an additional expectation which must be met to achieve promotion. It also needs to be recognised that there are other ways of proving teaching excellence than an HEA Fellowship e.g. PGCE

External income criterion in the teaching profile - UCU does not consider income expectation appropriate in the teaching profile; this is not a key factor in teaching, unless including student fees, the difference between subjects also makes this inequitable and unfair.

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UCU HE Pay dispute

On the 14th February 2014 the Higher Education Committee (HEC) of the UCU National Executive Committee (NEC) received a detailed report on the pay dispute: the message was clear – the tactics decided on 6 December are slowly furthering our claim. The employers are divided and we believe that some University managements are trying to distance themselves from the excessively hard-nosed approach of UCEA, who had instructed imposition of the 1% pay rise, in the expectation that the dispute would wither. It clearly hasn't, and the decisions made to further our strategy in December have led to a substantial move: the day before the HEC meeting, UCEA wrote to UCU responding to our request with the agreement to enter into exploratory talks with UCU about pay before the 2014-15 JNCHES pay round. This would not have happened but for your resolve to keep the dispute open through our working to contract and two hour strikes. However, the UCU National Head of Bargaining and Negotiations emphasised that we should not mistake talks with material gain: members must still continue with working to contract and prepare for a marking boycott to start on 28 April 2014.



Fair pay in education
Fighting for a fair deal for college and university staff

There will be no further strike action while we engage with UCEA in exploratory talks, continue with work to contract and prepare members and branches to take part in the marking boycott when required. In addition, HEC stressed the need to carry out campaigning activities to raise consciousness with both members and employers.

The OU Branch of UCU plan to organise a discussion/debate on the proposed marking boycott at WH and throughout regions/nations in order to maximise participation. Our next branch meeting for all members is on 11th March at 12.30pm in room B232 Wilson B block, 2nd floor—or you can take part remotely and we will circulate the online meeting links shortly.

UCU information on the marking boycott: <http://fairpay.web.ucu.org.uk/instructions-for-the-marking-boycott/#.Uw4PHIOIct>

Pauline Collins, Branch President

UCU: working to improve the careers

In the world of business, all funding is from external sources. In essence, they produce a product and sell it. The computer industry is one example; teams of software designers work on product development and, when the product is launched to market, this skilled workforce is redeployed onto new projects within the same company. The company benefits because they retain their skilled employees, and the employees benefit from the security of a permanent contract and a coherent career path.

The university sector is different. They hire researchers on Fixed Term Contracts (FTCs) on the basis that when the current project ends the funding ends and therefore so does the role. UCU see this as short-sighted and are working to change this attitude.

To join a project at the level of Research Associate (AC2) a researcher needs a PhD. This implies a minimum of 6 years full time study (3yrs undergrad and 3yrs doctoral) and usually significantly more. Researchers may also have experience and skills developed on previous projects. They are highly skilled and valuable employees.

During their time at the OU, researchers develop further expertise, learning the OU culture and ways of working. Yet at the end of the project, they must either apply for an internal vacancy if one turns up, be named as researcher on an upcoming project that gets funded, or get made redundant. Some researchers have skills that are so valuable, they have succeeded in running one contract on from the next, some for over 15 years.

Researchers at risk of redundancy can apply for vacancies using the "white slip" whereby they are given priority in the selection process. Researchers are also encouraged to bid for funding, although this is extremely difficult to fit in when working 100% on an externally funded project. The OU currently imposes restrictions on being able to bid as a PI when on an FTC, although many funding bodies (particularly non UK funders) no longer see contract type as a bar to leading on a bid.

Under pressure to keep the money coming in and with few reliable opportunities to continue their employment at the OU, many FTC researchers are forced to leave the university before the end of the project, forming a sort of "brain drain" that is detrimental to the OU's interests.

This situation benefits neither the researchers nor the university. Researchers lead an uncertain life, continually looking to the next post and at risk of repeated relocations from one university to another and periods of unemployment with all the financial risks this entails. The OU lose capable staff who wish to contribute to the university but are prevented by the system and forced, in many cases, to move elsewhere simply because there is too big a gap between their current project and the next one. Bridging funding is available in some circumstances, but the situation was unclear with information buried in different places on the HR website.

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ALs need fair employment

In the August 2011 issue (page 11) of *the Spark* we carried an article highlighting the unnecessary work, resources, and insecurity that is resulting from the OU's long standing practice of dismissing AL staff at the end of module life.

Events in two faculties have raised further issues about this process. Last April ALs on W100 were sent new appointments for W100 that were to continue until 2019/20. Some of them made plans accordingly, thinking their salaries were secure for a further five or six years. Imagine the shock when they were told in September 2013 that they were all being dismissed at the end of the current presentation. The OU had parted company with the College of Law, and is going to present its own law degree. The reaction of W100 ALs, and the correspondence from them, is eloquent testimony to the way most ALs see the process of being dismissed and having to reapply for their jobs, and further testifies to the damage being done on a regular basis to employment relations between the OU and its front line teaching staff.



Historically the university has cited changes in curriculum and teaching strategy as justification for dismissing ALs at end of module life. So while students are expected to be able to assimilate a new module's content, and establishment staff are expected to move from working on one module to another, ALs are not. We do not believe that history supports the university's view on this. In the real world ALs have risen to the occasion over and over again.

Computing has changed vastly over the last few decades, and when object oriented computing made its OU debut in the content of M206, many ex-M205 ALs had to learn O-O programming themselves, and were often just a few weeks ahead of the students due to late arrival of the software and course material. O-O computing was held to be fundamentally different from the procedural programming previously taught by M205, yet we managed to rise to the occasion and carry conviction in the front line even though we were learning it ourselves. A few years later, M150 (Computing Data and Information) had a successful first presentation, notwithstanding some ex-T175 ALs had to learn computer programming from scratch themselves in order to support students in their study of the M150 chapters on JavaScript. The peer support that developed amongst ALs during the first year of M150 was excellent, and a very productive synthesis of industrial and academic experience was noticeable on the tutors' forum.

It was not long after our current AL redundancy agreement was made in 2001 that many potentially redundant AL staff were redeployed, in many cases without interview, from M206 or T175 to M150. In fact M150 was almost entirely staffed in this way in regions where there were M150 appointments to go around. This is how UCU expected things to work if potentially redundant staff have a sufficiently good fit that staff development can be used to bridge the gap.

Some faculties felt that ALs should be called in for interview, simply because their staff tutor saw them so rarely. But then AL CDSA was introduced, that is supposed to fill this gap and provide regular review and feedback of AL work. But we are still stuck with a prehistoric dinosaur of a process of having to re-apply for our jobs, which is clearly unnecessary especially where a module is covering a similar academic area to its predecessor.

It is not only unnecessary to expect ALs to demonstrate that they meet the generic AL person spec, it also risks ALs bringing unfair dismissal cases if their CDSA and performance data shows them to be satisfactory ALs in the face of an interviewer who, for whatever reason, wasn't impressed on the day. The extra work for regional staff of reading through multiple versions of the generic part of the application is considerable. And while all this is going on, some faculties tend to forget that the university, like any other employer, has an obligation to provide reasonable staff development to enable potentially redundant staff take on new roles.

The other faculty whose processes should cause reflection is MCT in handling the transition from MST121 to MST124. Much of the curriculum is clearly similar, but the OU is introducing electronic marking of maths assignments, which students are encouraged to handwrite and scan in. This autumn the OU had not come up with a safe and efficient method of marking and commenting on these, or issued guidance to ALs on how it should be done. This did not stop the problem being unloaded on ALs, who, as part of an application process, were expected to solve a problem that the faculty and the university had, to date, failed to solve. The faculty itself had been hoping that the OU would financially contribute to the cost of extra technology, but when the university leadership said it wanted "a teaching solution", while washing its hands of whether such a solution existed, the problem was unloaded on ALs.

At various intervals, maths ALs received emails referring to decisions taken "at the highest level" about this. On the front page we carry an article about a pay rise awarded "at the highest level". Are we really paying the salaries "at the highest level" in return for "the highest level" of the university, washing its hands of the problems affecting ALs and students in the front line? We want to make it clear that we are against any member of staff (even at the highest level) being told "you must solve this problem, or go", yet this was exactly the situation that MST121 ALs applying for MST124 were put in.

The ensuing interviewing and selection process was not a level playing field, since some ALs had been provided with training and technology by the OU as a result of tutoring other modules, while other ALs had not been provided with either of these things.

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...continued ALs need fair employment

Far from occasioning proper training and staff development, the unusual practice of mass dismissal of teaching staff makes it very difficult to provide proper training and professional updating for ALs, because they are not told if they are appointed to a new module until few weeks (or days) before launch. It also militates against a responsible approach to technical innovation, instead of proper trialling and beta testing of new technology and proper training.

In conclusion it is time the OU changed its employment practices, and assumes that ALs will make the transition to successor modules.

Our AL Working Group (ALWG) negotiating team is in negotiations with the university about this.

Lesley Kane, Hon Secretary



Members attending UCU national meetings

We are pleased to report that several members are attending 2 UCU national meetings in the next few weeks. The Academic-Related annual meeting takes place on 5th March—Jeni Aldridge (Exec ordinary member) and Kate Servant (Central Academic-Related Staff Officer) are attending as delegates as well as Denzil de Souza as an observer.

The Annual Meeting for UCU members on Casualised Contracts takes place on 28th February and we are sending Stephen Pattinson (Hon Treasurer) and Costas Athanasopoulos (Equality Officer) as the branch delegates. Marcus Davison and Mik Heyslop are attending as observers, all four members are ALs.

UCU Health and safety newsletter

There is a new issue (February 2014) of the UCU Health and Safety newsletter at this address:

www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/o/g/Health_and_Safety_News_73_February_2014.pdf.



Branch co-opts Central Academic Staff officer

We are pleased to report that Jonathan Hughes from CACP has agreed to be co-opted onto the branch Executive Committee as our Central Academic Staff officer—we do still have a vacancy for a Regional/National Academic-Related staff officer, please contact ucu@open.ac.uk if you are interested?

Branch fills the Ordinary member vacancy

We are pleased to report that Chris Bollom from OUBS has agreed to be co-opted onto the branch Executive Committee to fill the Ordinary member vacancy that we had. Further information on our Exec committee is at this address:

http://ucu.open.ac.uk/branch_committee.

The big picture

Hon Secretary speaks at House of Commons event

On 10th January 2014, a last minute invitation for a speaker at a House of Commons teach-in organised by Red Pepper just three days later on 13th January wended its way to the OU UCU branch mailbox.

After a quick round of email to see which branch officers could go at such short notice it devolved on me, the branch Hon. Secretary. The event had been prompted by the need to raise awareness of the Rothschild report which the Guardian gained access to last June: <http://bit.ly/1d3OqrG>.



At the heart of this report was a proposal to sell off student debt to private companies, opening the door to increased interest rates on existing student debt. This clearly has worrying implications for many people, and the organisers also felt it was time to have a look at the “big picture” of what the higher fees and student loans is doing to education and to students. In that vein, they wanted a speaker who knew something about the OU and the impact on its mission and its student body. However, our input had to be succinct because there were five other speakers including [Andrew McGettigan](#), author of *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education* and [Natalie Fenton](#), Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths and former president of the University and College Union. Several Labour MPs including Katy Clarke and Paul Blomfield were there.

The first two speakers explained the financial futility of the student loan system, which is not giving the returns expected, and the danger of the debt being sold to private companies. We also learned that the Rothschild report had suggested that the “ideal” would be for HE institutions to take over the debts of their students.

When it was my turn, I began by reviewing the OU UCU branch position as expressed in back issues of *the Spark*. Even before the advent of the Con-Dem government, the mission of the OU had already taken a bashing from successive governments, and latterly from the ELQ cuts. Many aspects of the OU student experience, such as residential schools or regular weekly/fortnightly tutorials are now much thinner on the ground than they once were. But the reaction to the cut of most HEFCE grant money, and the consequent rise in fees was initially horror and disbelief amongst OU teaching staff. Some of us even feared it would be an extinction level disaster for the OU. OU students often have to make big sacrifices of time, and look to their consciences over the time it takes away from their family life. A family is also an economic unit, and saddling themselves and their families with debt as well is bound to militate against many adult would-be students enrolling in higher education.

Previous speakers had already highlighted that the motivation higher fees and student loans was not primarily financial, but to change the way education was seen, so its purpose is seen as enhancing future earning capacity. This was a difficult gamble for potential students aged 17 or 18, but for adult students already in their 30s, 40s or 50s the evaluation of debt vs earning capacity in the future is bound to militate against engaging in higher education. It was well-known that there had been a 40% fall in enrolments of part-time students in HE since the introduction of higher fees.

In the case of the OU, the impact has not been at extinction level, but the reassuring phrases of the university leadership have not been entirely borne out either. A recent Arts faculty paper quoted a 30% fall in enrolments for AA100 13J, and a redundancy meeting I had attended for a Science academic earlier the same day, had heard of a fall in numbers from 44 thousand and something, to 25 thousand and something. And in the case of the OU the full effects may not yet be apparent because there will still be a few transitionally funded students still studying at level 1.

If the proposals in the Rothschild report are followed through, it will very likely be more seriously bad news for the OU. The OU mission includes opening higher education to those who would not otherwise have access to it, and many students who fall in this category come from sections of the population who are likely to be debt averse. They may well become even more debt averse when it is realised that the government may change the terms of their loan repayments, and that they could end up owing the money to private companies. The suggestion that institutions themselves could become the creditors (presumably to give them a financial stake in their students' earning capacity) can only be a further severe blow to the OU whose students may already have half or more of their economically active years behind them.

Finally, I made a plea for adult students who often have pressing reasons for studying, whether for ELQ qualifications or for their first qualification. Examples included carers for disabled family members, (sometimes referred to as the “other” NHS) who are studying to gain understanding of the medical and social issues they have to deal with. The awful term “leisure learner” has a hollow ring to students in this position.

There is still time for the OU community to unite and campaign against the commodification of education that is being pursued by the Con-Dem government, and I believe the UCU branch must continue to pursue this.

Lesley Kane, Hon. Secretary

Training courses for UCU Reps

UCU runs a number of courses for members taking on union roles, from specialist training for health and safety reps to general training for departmental reps and union officers. As a relatively new rep, and an even newer member of the Executive Committee, I recently attended the *REP 1* and *2* courses at UCU's head office in London.

REP 1: Induction is a 3 day course providing an introduction to the role of a union rep. The course began by discussing the purpose of unions, the legal rights of a union to represent its members, and the levels of support that different employers may offer to their recognised unions. Reps are entitled to paid time to perform their union duties, but extra facilities could vary from a filing cabinet to the use of an entire building complete with support staff. Next we looked at the provisions of the Equality Act and ways to boost union membership, before spending the final day learning how to identify and build successful campaigns.

These courses attract attenders from a wide range of backgrounds, and they provide an excellent opportunity to swap experiences and learn from each other. Our tutor encouraged us to discuss our situations so that the group work and teaching would be relevant to our own workplaces. Participants on my course ranged from branch secretaries with decades of experience, to new members who had been snapped up onto their branch committee at their very first meeting, with reps of varying degrees of experience in between. Our employers included further education colleges, universities and research institutions. There were enough similarities and differences between us to provoke some very interesting discussions. I would recommend the Rep 1 course to anyone who is considering taking a more active role in the union, perhaps as a departmental or specialist rep, or as a member of the executive. The course gives a good background to the role of unions, and provides an opportunity to see which union activities are most likely to interest you.

REP 2: Representing UCU Members is another 3 day course, this one designed to support caseworkers. It covered the basics of casework from supporting members when resolving situations informally, through to working with disciplinary and grievance procedures when an informal solution is not possible. We also received a grounding in the procedures for applying to UCU's scheme for legal services for members. Be warned, there is a significant element of role play in this course, although everyone plays a part so you are not required to dredge up an Oscar winning performance in front of an audience!

REP 2 would be valuable to anyone who is beginning to take on casework: it will increase your confidence, provide you with a basic framework for how to approach casework, and guide you to sources for further advice. It also provides all caseworkers with an opportunity to practice their skills within a supportive group, and to benefit from the other participants' advice and experience.

The Basics:

REP 1 and *REP 2* are separate courses, but you are normally required to complete *REP 1* before *REP 2*. The courses are free to UCU members, and UCU will pay for your travel expenses. More information about these and other UCU courses can be found at this address: http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/3/p/Activist_Ed_Guide_13Nov13.pdf.

Kate Servant, Central Academic-Related Staff Officer

The following text is taken from the OU and OU Branch of the UCU Agreement on time for trade union duties and activities.

8. Time for Training of recognised Trade Union Officers

The Open University recognises that trade union officers need the skills and knowledge to carry out their duties effectively, and it is to the advantage of the University management and staff that accredited Union Officers should attend approved training courses to assist them in the proper discharge of duties, in addition to the practical experience acquired from holding office. There will also be UCU organised courses that may be appropriate for trade union members e.g. courses regarding retirement.

Training should be relevant to the employment relations duties and role of the trade union officer, and training should be approved by the TUC, or the President of the OUBUCU.

Where a need for basic or further training has been identified the President of the OUBUCU will advise the Director of Human Resources of the name of the Trade Union Officer, what training is approved, indicating the content of the training course or programme, and indicating proposed dates and duration. The Director of Human Resources will write to the Head of Unit to ask them to agree to the release of the member of staff. Agreement to attend will not be unreasonably withheld, (the reasons will be given in writing for any refusal) and except in exceptional circumstances the University will normally be given at least one month's notice of the training course/s.

The number of officers receiving training at any one time, and the amount and frequency of training for any individual officer should be that which is reasonable in the circumstances taking account of the operational requirements of the University. There are separate provisions for health and safety training as set out in point 9 (of the OU & UCU agreement).



AL Working group report

The AL working group (ALWG) exists to deal with AL concerns that can be resolved within the current contract and has the task of updating aspects of the current contract that may be considered necessary. The group makes recommendations to the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) for approval.

The group now includes a representative of the faculties in addition, on the management side, to representatives from AL Services and HR. Issues needing broader agreement in faculties are being taken back for further discussion. This is currently happening with a number of AL appointment issues that we reported on in the last issue of *the Spark* and on which discussions continue as noted below. The group met in December 2013 and January 2014.

AL Appointments

Work continues in seeking agreement on ways to resolve a number of AL appointment issues that can create redundancies are often time consuming and are a real frustration to ALs. This includes the following:

- **Changing presentation patterns**
We are trying to reach agreement on a form of words that will enable ALs to be simply reallocated to new presentation patterns when presentation patterns change. This may seem like an obvious thing to happen but it has, in the past, led to potential redundancy situations that could have been avoidable.
- **Successor modules**
Discussions continue on a form of words to describe a successor module that would enable ALs to be transferred from an old module to a new successor module, without the need for a full recruitment process, as is the norm now. We are seeking an agreement that should staff development be necessary, to enable an AL to teach a successor module; then this should be made available in the 6 months prior to a successor module starting.
- **Appointable status**
We have proposed that "appointable" status to a new module should be extended from the current 12 months. Feedback from faculties is favourable and we await agreement from the management side. This would reduce the need for a further application should an opportunity to tutor on a module emerge at a later date.

AL Telephony

We reported in the last issue of *the Spark* that we had asked that the OU extend the use of the Microsoft Lync software (internet based telephone calls/online meetings) to ALs to enable better communication between staff and students. An "ambition" statement for an AL telephony service has been drafted and there will be wider discussion with ALs to understand better the telephone and other communication needs. The impact of Student Support Teams (SSTs) on AL communication needs, is also being considered. This will inevitably lead to a need for a business case if resource is to be allocated to this.

ETMAs and maths modules

There have been concerns raised by members about the move to ETMAs on maths modules and how this can best be done, without excessive workload implications for ALs. Discussions are to take place with the faculty to resolve this.

Response times to student queries

We reported last time that there were apparent inconsistencies between faculties in what was expected as a response time to students. Wording is being considered to clarify this within the AL Code of Conduct and we expect final agreement at the Joint Negotiating Committee in March 2014.

Disciplinary Action

We have been trying to ensure that there is clarity over who carries out disciplinary action, where an AL has multiple managers. Final wording needs to be agreed to ensure the lead line manager must be aware of any disciplinary action being carried out by a task manager.

Teaching opportunities for post graduate OU students

The university have asked that postgraduate students have opportunities as internal staff to apply for AL work. We have asked that the university consider a wider package of teaching opportunities for postgraduate students, that would include supporting experienced ALs at day schools, which would provide Face-to-Face experience that PG students would find valuable in applying for lecturer roles in conventional universities. There should also be opportunities within faculties to support the development of teaching materials. Discussion will continue on this.

Future items to be discussed

- **Residential school appointments** - We have asked that the university consider a longer appointment period for residential schools and remove the need to present a full application every year.
- **TSA (Tutor-student allocation)** - The short period between final registration and modules starting has meant that TSA can be a last minute process with ALs perhaps not knowing if they have a group until the week before module start. We have indicated that this is not a good experience for students or staff and that we want to consider ways of enabling earlier TSA.
- **Advice on tax relief for AL work** - Members have asked whether the OU can negotiate with HMRC on an agreement on tax relief for home working for ALs. To clarify what an AL can claim against. We are awaiting a response on this.

AL working group team: Bruce Heil, David Knowles, Judy Ekins & Pauline Collins

Thank you from the branch & voices from the picket lines

The branch wishes to thank all OU UCU members who took part in a picket line on the recent strike days — apart from the two picket lines at Walton Hall, there were picket lines at the following regional/national centres:

London, Bristol, Birmingham, Nottingham, Leeds, Manchester, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast and East Grinstead.



Fair pay in education
Fighting for a fair deal for college and university staff

Picket line at East Grinstead

Paula James, John James and Lesley Kane organised a picket line at the office in East Grinstead on 3rd December. They had the same amount of appreciative hoots and a cheery greeting from the Assistant Director. Paula has sent the following note about the second strike day to the local newspaper, the East Grinstead Courier.

The University and College Union have joined with UNISON and Unite to demand fair pay for the teaching and support staff who make our universities great centres of learning and research. With a surplus of more than 1.1 billion the University management can certainly meet our modest demand of salaries that keep pace with inflation. We have suffered a pay cut in real terms of 13% over the last four years. Many lecturers, teachers and academic related staff are also vigorously lobbying for the restoration of free higher education. We join with the National Union of Students, who are supporting our strikes. Together we are calling for a reinvestment in our universities and in the future of our students of all ages.

John and Paula were back on the picket line with placards and leaflets on the 6th February. I contacted the local press but yet again got no coverage. Passing traffic at the front of the building did hoot in solidarity and I did speak to various colleagues who went in from the car park (the back of the office.) We were brought a coffee and it did not rain till just as we were leaving.

Quote from John James, AL rep for East Grinstead: "you've got to be in it, to win it, so come along to your picket"!

Paula James, regional/national centre rep for East Grinstead

Picket line at Nottingham

We had successful picket lines at the R05 Nottingham office for all the recent strikes -both UCU and UNISON members. On 3 December the weather was kind and we got positive reactions from almost everyone we talked to. All accepted leaflets and two took UCU joining information and might well join up. We had a good display of placards and I made a placard with a coloured -in version of Graham Storey's graph of University salaries vs inflation (see page 14), and that visual display proved very effective. The car park was much quieter than usual so a fair number were on strike, from both UCU and UNISON, in addition to those picketing.

Since short strikes are a new tactic, it will take a while to work out how best to arrange things for maximum effectiveness. I think there is a lot to be said for it, in terms of not hitting people so hard in pay deductions, when they take part (which is obviously why some hard line VCs are trying to negate that by deducting a whole day – we should take that as a compliment to the tactic). And also, if we do the "theatre" correctly, walking out and walking in during the working day could be quite a powerful statement to colleagues (since that's the only audience most of us have). I can see that there are problems for people who don't work 9-5 so maybe the Union needs to think of clever ways to address this.

Still on the positive, there were a number of additional colleagues picketing during the two hour strikes – possibly because on whole strike days some of us have to get up even earlier than usual and travel quite a distance just to "not work" and for many that is not an attractive option. On the down side, we do not see so many colleagues passing the picket line if it is not covering the busy arrival time of 8 – 9.30am. During the two hour strikes, we found it very useful to ask colleagues our "quiz" about "How much do you think the OU VC has earned so far while we have been standing out here on strike?" (we had a large "VC Time" clock on display). Most people really did not know and a slightly more successful question was how much do you think the VC earns per day (£1600+ of course) and most people were well under on this, even after several prompts of "more, more". And generally this was a strong point with most people as was the graph from Graham Storey showing almost no pay increase since 2008. Everyone understood that this was not a personal thing about the VC rather about the shocking contrast in employers' attitudes to staff pay.

Brendan Quinn, regional/national centre rep for Nottingham



News from the Pickets at Walton Hall : 3rd Dec 2013

My first picket line! Thanks to John Bennett and Nicholas van Labeke who got there before 7am to set up the posters and deliver the placards and leaflets. A good number of UCU and UNISON members were on the picket line, handing out the leaflets and having a quick word with members and non-members alike when they stopped. Andrew Trigg's sterling efforts at engaging people in conversation meant that a bit of a traffic jam developed two or three times. Most staff and visitors were good natured about this, opening their windows to take leaflets and give words of encouragement. Then there were others who were obviously annoyed at the (pretty short) wait and spoke to us through their windows – luckily we couldn't hear what was being said! And some people got very annoyed, switched lanes and sped up as they passed us; there were a couple of times it really did seem as if the drivers wouldn't have cared if they'd hit us - I had no idea being a member of UCU could be so exciting.

A couple of very nice local bobbies turned up about 8.45. They were just investigating how long the traffic jams might continue. One of them turned out to be an OU graduate!

Special thanks to Andrew Trigg, Helen Yanacopulos and Peter Robbins, who drove from London to picket at Walton Hall – that really is dedicated unionism.

Meridian, Exec Member



Walton Hall picket line—January 2014

We had a much larger gathering of members for the two hour strikes than on a normal full strike day— one member reported that normally he would stay at home on a strike day, in order to have a lie-in. However with the 2 hour strikes, staff were already at work and so wanted to do something for the 2 hours, making it easier to attend the picket lines.

The arrival of the constabulary is par for the course at Walton Hall picket lines. It is a rare event when they don't turn up. Indeed, on one occasion they threatened to arrest Alan Woodley, who was dressed in a monkey suit (with a sign nearby about staff being paid peanuts!) because he was cooking pancakes beneath a sign which said (in reference to the pay offer) "It's a Crepe Deal".



Picket line at Leeds

There were several R07 UCU members and one UNISON member at the Leeds regional/national centre. Thank you all for attending and sticking it out on a cold December morning.

First of all a big thank you to the UCU members who supported the two-hour strike on 23rd January. We had the biggest turnout ever on the picket line, so thanks everybody. I appreciate these two-hour strikes are difficult for people, and everybody is stretched to the limit with the move to SSTs, and some of you have felt that, all this is doing is making you have to catch up on the two hours of work. Not getting your work done because of the strike means it is having an impact, though, so let's keep up the momentum. Please keep up the brilliant support!

Elvira Haeussler, regional/national centre rep for Leeds



Pictured from left to right: Alison Andrew, Jean White (UNISON) and Naomi Colhoun.

Picket line at Birmingham

I can report that all went well on the 3rd December. I arrived just after 7.30am and set up camp outside the building. I left at 10am having watched the world go by - very slowly during rush hour but it did mean everyone was able to read the placard as they went by! A few passers-by chatted to me and enquired about the strike. Staff in the Regional Centre were very kind and I've never had so many offers of a coffee! And I almost forgot about the fire drill so everyone joined me on the picket line for a brief period of time!

Martina Gibbons, regional/national centre rep for Birmingham

News from the Irish picket lines—Jan 2014

The 2 hour strike seems more popular than the full day action here in general among the regular pickets. Staffing a picket line for 2 hours is more manageable and attractive, I gained a few new pickets in the last week and we took half hour on and off rolling shifts to then go and get a local coffee shop, or do some errands (a city centre location helps). Walking out of the office having started a day's work felt more effective than turning up to picket early and standing outside the office as 'outsiders'. Other staff certainly noticed it more and were talking about the 'walk out' to us rather than just walking passed us once on the picket line as they entered work on a full day strike then never seeing us again all day when we are out of sight, out of mind.

That said, again I appreciate it can be more problematic for staff working varying hours etc.

Mid morning or mid afternoon works better, we got noticed more around lunchtime as opposed to early morning when everyone is rushing into work. Being a prominent building on a busy city centre corner site helps. I don't think the 9-11 timing next week will be as effective as it is just akin to starting late, I'd be much more strongly in favour of 3 or 4 planned 2 hour stoppages than one full day, much more effective and the same loss in pay (roughly).

Specifically re 28th Jan: a planned day long meeting from 11am-4pm in the national office (Belfast) was cut short by our directorate here and finished before 2pm, as they knew that at least 4 members attending would walk out. This was an impact we never get just standing outside all day.

Final point: the out of office message are quite effective in terms of raising the profile of the dispute over those 2 hours also. And we all need to spread the word about tightening up on working to contract and letting all our contacts know - again email signatures/out of office messages important in this regard.

Philip O'Sullivan, Staff Tutor Social Sciences, UCU Rep for Belfast and Regional/National Academic Staff Officer



Pictured from left to right: Elaine Thomas, Christine Compton, Janice Holmes, Roisin McPhilemy and Ruth Jackson.

Picket line at Bristol, Dec 2013

Our photo shows two UNISON members (Richard Brice and Jenny Webster, but the photo was taken by a UCU member.

Liz White, regional/national centre rep for Bristol



Picket line at Leeds—23 and 28 Jan 2014

We had a record number of attendees on the Leeds picket line for the first of the two hour strikes on 23rd January, so thanks to all R07 members for your support.

Thank you also for your support on the second day, 28 January. Attendance was not as high this time, but this was due to part-time staff working patterns rather than anything to do with support.

Elvira Haeussler, regional/national centre for Leeds



Picket line at Manchester

There were several UCU stalwarts (for want of a better phrase) - myself, Elaine and Hilary on the picket line on 3rd December 2013. It was cold and grey, but we had good support from passing traffic and many members of staff stopped and took leaflets.

Sarah Wilkinson, regional/national centre rep for Manchester

UCU produces New Film for Disability History Month

UCU has produced a new film for Disability History Month. The film features Colin Barnes, Professor of Disability Studies at the University of Leeds, and explores the origins and meaning of the social model of disability.

This film commemorates Disability History and is a trade union and teaching resource to raise awareness of the importance of the social model of disability. We have aimed to make the film accessible to all members, and would welcome any feedback.

You can view the film on the UCU homepage here: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/disabmem>.

Or directly on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Do6U1j1vRYU>.

Further information on Disability History month at: <http://ukdisabilityhistorymonth.com>.

UCU Equality unit



Not ELATE(D) merely exploited

ALs are not paid on the academic pay scale. We also all know that most ALs give the OU twice as many hours as we are actually paid.

In conversation with many ALs this is generally because we like our students and our subjects and wholeheartedly agree with the concept of lifelong learning and the opening up of HE to all adults. We also work huge amounts of unpaid hours because of the character of the work and because the OU's standards demand it.



We also know that included in our salary are all sorts of items such as two days of Staff Development, most IT training, administration and all our IT costs (PC, consumables, Broadband etc). As part of our salary these items are all taxed at the standard rate (it's been going on for years but the OU has not found the time to negotiate exemptions with Inland Revenue). So we don't even get what we are supposed to according to the academic-related pay scale.

A third strand is also appearing. This is the demand for more unpaid work under the heading of professional development and IT training. Here we are exhorted to spend even more additional unpaid hours on work which other employers would provide within paid working hours.

Despite years of study and often decades of teaching experience (and good academic credentials often as good as our full-time colleagues) we are being reduced to unpaid Interns.

Take the latest ELATE(D) course just advertised for Social Science ALs. It requires a mere 14 weeks of only 5-6 hours of work per week (including 2 reading weeks) plus a three part TMA and a final practical activity.

Leaving aside the value of the course (this is unknown - it will provide no qualification) or the wisdom of the OU's dash to the Internet (where all the evidence points to reduced participation/satisfaction), this module will probably mean giving the OU about 90 hours of additional unpaid work. This is getting on for half of that paid for 60 point Module. Of course, the ALs will also have to provide, for free, their own equipment and meet any other costs.

This demand is ridiculous and an insult to ALs. If it's worth doing – then it's worth the OU paying its ALs to do it. ALs are urged to boycott these modules.

John James, AL Rep for East Grinstead

Do not cover for absent colleagues or vacant posts

From the title of this you will probably assume that it is something to do with the current work to contract in support of the campaign for fair pay. Whilst not covering for staff who are absent from work is a valid form of action for staff at the Walton Hall campuses, or in regional or national offices, that is not why this piece has been written. (NB: Associate Lecturers* are treated differently when it comes to covering for absence.)

All of you have a job title and role description detailing what your duties are. (If you do not, then raise that issue with the unit's management in the first instance, but alert us to this problem if they do not provide you with an accurate and true job description without delay.)

We know that colleagues may be taken ill without warning and are unable to come to work, or they can be absent without notice for some other valid reason, such as bereavement. Consequently their duties will not be done unless someone *volunteers* to cover for their absence; or, someone is asked or told to provide cover, even if only in part, for what may be an indefinite period. My advice is that you should not volunteer, and you should refuse to be co-opted.

The reason why you should not volunteer, and why you should refuse to provide cover is that you have a full workload already and unless this is re-negotiated, you are increasing this. To cover for an absent colleague will create work overload and stress that, inevitably, may affect your performance. In fact, your unit will view it amiss if your own job and/or the one you are covering for, in whole or in part, are not done to their satisfaction.

Also, if something goes wrong when you are carrying out extra duties, the OU may decide to take some form of disciplinary action against you for negligence. The OU won't care that you have got work overload because you took on extra duties.

A similar problem may arise when someone leaves. For example, three people in an office had similar tasks, but different areas of responsibility. One of them got another job and left. The remaining two individuals were asked to cover for that vacant post till such time as it could be filled. Though they reminded their unit from time to time that they were still covering for the vacant post, two years later they still had those extra responsibilities and they were badly stressed by the extra workload. When both were rebuked publicly for failing to attend to the duties of the post they were covering for on a particular day when their own duties had had to take precedence, finally they came to the union for help.

A meeting was held with management to clear the air and, to their astonishment, they were told that the vacant post no longer existed, and that the money for it had been used to create a different job elsewhere in the same unit. No one in management had told them this despite their repeated reminders that they were covering for the vacant post. It was clear that the unit had decided without consultation or any transparency to let them carry on with their excessive workload. Whilst the matter was resolved to their satisfaction and the vacant post was advertised and then filled, they were not compensated for stress or rewarded for their efforts.

I wish I could say that the above example is rare, but alas it is not. Just think about units where someone retires, but is not replaced. This means that their colleagues pick up extra workload. If there are ten people in the section, and one retires, then nine are doing the work of ten. Supposing someone else leaves and is not replaced, then eight are doing the work of ten...

The moral of this article is: **Do not let management exploit you or take advantage of your good nature. We advise members who are asked to provide cover to seek advice from the UCU branch at ucu@open.ac.uk as soon as possible.**

As part of our current pay campaign, we are asking union members to work to contract, and that means not providing absence cover, unless you are contractually obliged to do so. There is an FAQ about cover for absent colleagues during the work to contract on the national UCU web site, which asks "Can I refuse to cover for absent colleagues?" and the answer is:

"Our legal advice is that unless it is explicitly stated within your contract, you should refuse to cover for colleagues unless this is a clearly established custom and practice."

If in doubt about how this applies to you please seek advice from us as soon as possible if you are asked to provide cover. During the work to contract we are asking members not to work more than their contractual working hours, and not more than the EU 48 hour week, even if your contract gives your hours as "whatever is necessary to get the job done".

More information about the work to contract can be found on the national UCU web site at www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=6804.

* It is different for Associate Lecturers because if they cover for absent colleagues then they get paid for those extra duties. That is not the case for staff at Walton Hall, or in regional, or national offices.

John Bennett, Exec member



University chiefs' five-figure pay rises described as 'inappropriate'

The Telegraph analysed the pay of vice-chancellors at 79 universities, detailed in annual accounts covering the academic year to August 2013 and published on the institutions' websites.

Martin Bean, vice-chancellor of the Open University, whose students study at home, received the highest pay package at £407,000, up 11%. A spokesman said the institution is the country's largest university and needed an "exceptional" leader with experience of the highest levels of education and business.

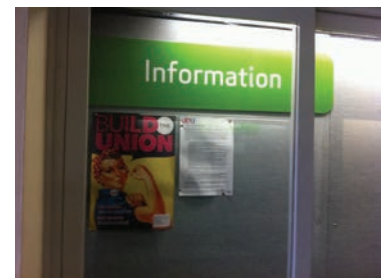
The full article can be read at this address:

www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/10532752/University-chiefs-five-figure-pay-rises-described-as-inappropriate-and-unfair.html

Success in the wind tunnel

The Branch Administrator has been successful at getting poster space in the new display cases in the wind tunnel at Walton Hall, near to the Hub. We are sharing the Information section of the display cases with two other OU units: Health and Safety and the University Secretary's office. Deb has offered to share the space with the UNISON branch and is happy for UNITE, Amicus and NuJ to do the same. There are four active trade unions at the Open University, roughly speaking they represent the following groups of staff:

- UCU for Academics, Researchers, Academic-Related and Associate Lecturer staff
- UNISON for Secretarial & Clerical staff
- UNITE for technical staff (Amicus merged with TGWU in 2007 to form UNITE, the largest trade union in the UK.
- NuJ (National Union of Journalists) for Editors in LTS—there is a joint membership arrangement with UCU where NuJ members only have to pay UCU local subs, rather than the full amount.



Branch 2 hour strike survey results

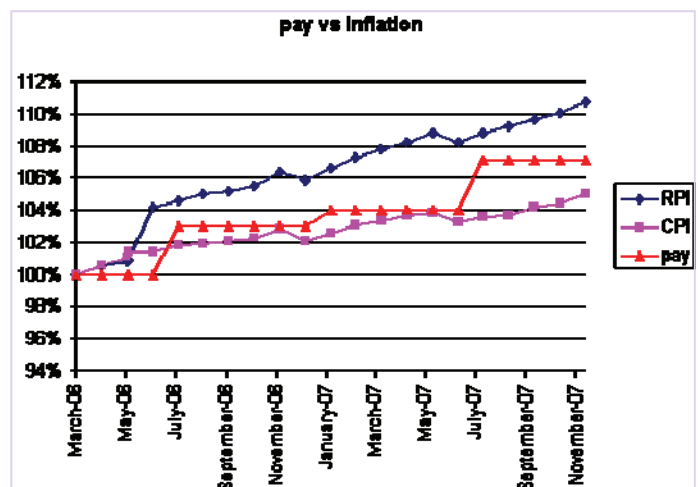
Thank you to all members who completed our Survey monkey poll that we issued after the first of the two hour strikes — 70% of members (who completed the survey) said that they had supported the first of the 2 hour strikes.

Further responses welcome at this address: www.surveymonkey.com/s/W3XRMNY.

HE pay decline

One of our regional reps found the following graph on the website of the UCU branch at University College London. The following graph compares RPI, CPI and compounded pay in percentage terms over the period for which government figures are available to December 2007. The RPI and CPI 100% baseline is taken as the midpoint between the previous settlement and the last (i.e. March 2006). The first three salary increases are clearly seen on the graph. The next increase is May 2008.

The full article can be read at this address: www.ucl.ac.uk/unions/UCU/campaigns/pay.htm



Letters to the Editor

Spark welcomes letters from branch members on any issues likely to be relevant to the branch. Please email your letter to ucu@open.ac.uk to appear in the next issue.

Dear OU UCU

Thank you for sending the UCU document on MOOCs. I had seen it when it was first published, and I've taken the opportunity to re-read it. I think it's a thoughtful and well written document, setting out a good background to MOOC developments. I have a few comments, and please regard these as a personal response, rather than in being in any way a 'FutureLearn line'.

The development of a UCU policy position on MOOCs seems very sensible. But I would be saddened if it were mainly based around challenges to the failings of MOOC organisations and strategies. So while I agree that UCU should challenge any use of MOOCs to further stratify the HE sector, it would be helpful also to support the use of MOOCs to widen access to higher education in the UK and worldwide. For example, I hope that UCU would welcome courses such as "A BEGINNERS' GUIDE TO WRITING IN ENGLISH FOR UNIVERSITY STUDY" and "BEGIN PROGRAMMING: BUILD YOUR FIRST MOBILE GAME" from University of Reading, "START WRITING FICTION" from the OU and "PREPARING FOR UNI" from UEA, all announced for the FutureLearn platform as free courses to develop skills for entering higher education.

The document says that the FutureLearn courses are "mainly in science-related areas", but FutureLearn is offering a greater percentage of non-science courses than the other major platforms, and most of the newly announced courses are in arts, humanities and social sciences.

It says that "these idealistic goals have now morphed into university partnerships with venture capitalists and for-profit education companies". That may be true for some MOOC platforms. While FutureLearn has been set up as a for-profit company, as I understand all profits will be put back into enhancing the company and there is no intention of forming a partnership with venture capitalists. I have been impressed by how the ideals and mission of the OU permeates the entire company – I certainly wouldn't be involved otherwise!

Completion rates are only a problem if the aim is to provide courses for credit. If MOOCs are seen as a way for people to engage with higher learning with minimal barriers to entry and an engaging experience, then completion rates are fairly irrelevant. What's important is that people can study where, when and to the extent that they are motivated to continue. The aim of the MOOC providers should be to provide an engaging and educationally valuable experience – not a forced march to completion.

And lastly, I suggest that UCU could indicate a concern with research ethics and data privacy of MOOCs. What data should MOOC providers and partners be collecting on learners? What rights should learners have to protect their data? What should be the ethics policy for MOOC research, given that the 'massive open' courses offer new possibilities for large scale comparative research as well as access to data not only on course progress but also social interactions?

Mike Sharples (Personal reply)

In the spirit of openness, I'm happy for the text to appear, with my name, in the next issue of the Spark newsletter – but with the clear indication that's it's my personal response and not in my capacity as Academic Lead for FutureLearn.

Dear OU UCU

It has been a couple of years since I was last in contact and I wanted to thank you again for all your support regarding my bullying case with the Open University. I have since left - my contract had only one more year to go and I was not intending to renew, so all totally unnecessary from their point of view. I am sanguine about the whole situation now. But given my personal circumstances (my mother had just died) this was a horrible experience and the union was fantastic. I never imagined myself as the sort of person likely to be bullied, and would have been dismissive of others' allegations until then, so I suppose I learnt from the whole experience (without sounding like an American self help motivational book!).

I work with a private consultancy now. The pay and conditions are infinitely better. I am not sure if there is anything I can do in the future, but I am intending to go into politics, so I won't forget the role you played during an exceptionally difficult time.

Happy New Year and best wishes for 2014.

OU UCU member

Letters to the Editor continued

Dear Vice Chancellor (copy to the UCU branch)

I am writing to you regarding the 1% pay increase imposed for university staff, while at the same time those at the top like yourself receive much larger increases.

This morning's comprehensive survey published by UCU shows that VCs received on average more than five times the pay rise given to staff <https://list.mercury.uvu.org.uk/t/119288/1103068/790/0/>, with nearly one-third getting increases of 10% or more.

I along with other staff, appreciate that you are doing an excellent job in leading and promoting the Open University. However you can only do that on the back of us dedicated and hardworking staff, who have seen our pay fall way below inflation over the last five years. The oft quoted phrase that "we're all in this together" clearly isn't applying here. The last thing staff want is to cause disruption, but many now feel that we are being forced into a corner.

Can I request that you use your influence to try to resolve this situation. How can this large pay rise differential possibly be justified?

With best regards,

Fraser Robertson, MCT

Dear Martin (copy to the UCU branch)

I am writing as a staff member whose pay is determined by a national framework. I accept that it is appropriate that VCE-level staff have a local agreement through the Remuneration Committee, and that the work of the committee is necessarily confidential. However, I wish to express my despair that the body of experience, from commercial and public sectors, included on this committee has apparently not judged the level of institutional risk involved in determining awards that are demonstrably at odds with the 1% employers' offer.

The level of change that the OU has experienced, while led by you, continues to be delivered by the majority. I believe that the culture of the university sector generally is sustained by vocational passion and intellectual loyalty (to a field of expertise). We are not (financially) rewards-led, and we are uncomfortably aware that our UK students are increasingly realising that they are the subject of commercial operations rather than of public education. It is therefore of real concern that UK VC remuneration is so far removed from all engagement with national adversity, despite coming within the purview of public funding, that no lessons have been taken from any parallel public debate on remuneration, most recently MPs but perhaps also relevant is the stance on remuneration for council chief executives (who do manage to keep themselves off the front pages as a result). Collectively, members of UCEA have generated a focus for moral outrage through their own actions, that was previously absent from the national pay dispute.

As one of your staff, I would much prefer reassurance that the VCE is listening and trying to find a solution (which I take to be the usual function of VCE) rather than authorising platitudes about international competitiveness. This line has never worked when deployed by the financial sector, and I am surprised that an adept communicator would expect it to work with us.

Yours sincerely

OU UCU member

Letters to the Editor continued

Dear OU UCU branch

I was wondering if the union can do anything to help tutors in their dealings with HMRC, either directly or by persuading OU Finance to help. This would save ALs and HMRC time and hassle, and possibly make us all a little bit of extra, badly needed cash.

I say this as I, and judging by the AL Common room forum, a number of ALs are individually having to negotiate what they can and cannot claim as expenses with HMRC. As usual with HMRC this is complex and difficult to understand and, consequently interpreted in different ways by different HMRC staff and offices.

This year for example, they have challenged every single thing I claimed for and I have had to send off the best part of 100 pages of standard and freely available documents from the OU website, to try and prove my case. Given that they are not the best organisation in terms of communicating by phone or letter, this is turning into some sort of Kafka nightmare, where I write to them and they ignore what I have written and raise something irrelevant or slightly change the goal posts each time to confuse me further. I have up phoning after getting cut off several times after waiting for over 30 minutes on an expensive phone line.

I guess this is all part of the effort to make the rich pay their taxes, only spilling over to the not so rich! It appears every single AL has to negotiate separately and can consequently be treated differently. This seems ludicrous to me and a complete waste of time for ALs and for HMRC!

In other organisations I have worked for, this is all negotiated by the Finance or Tax team, usually to the advantage of the employee, so I was wondering if someone at the OU UCU branch can look into this.

I think the issue is that while previously we had one tax office or at least a few were dealing with ALs, now each AL has to make an individual agreement with a random tax person. Consequently every AL is being treated differently and in a number of cases given a hard time by HMRC because they haven't got a clue about the OU or ALs.

I personally have had to send about 100 pages of standard OU documentation just to prove I have to work from home, have to have a PC and no one provides it for me, etc. It appears from the AL Forum that I am not the only one, and everyone is coming to a different agreement as individual HMRC officers interpret the rules differently.

This seems a complete waste of time for us and them, and is often resolved by large organisations for their staff so everyone knows where they stand. If we are to get back to that position then the OU would have to negotiate exactly what we can and can't claim for, and I guess the union or AL rep process would need to put pressure on management. Just a thought to make all our lives a little easier.

Graham Crane, AL

Branch response: *The issue was raised at the AL working group meeting on 28 Jan 2014. HR have agreed to take it back and discuss it. We have asked that if they believe they cannot provide an agreement for ALs with HMRC that they explain why that is not possible.*



The Open University branch of UCU

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The Open University,
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Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
Phone: (01908) 6(53069)
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.

Your Executive Committee 2013-14

President: Pauline Collins

Honorary Secretary: Lesley Kane

Honorary Treasurer: Stephen Pattinson

Vice Presidents: David Knowles and Meridian

Equality Officer: Costas Athanasopoulos

Central Academic Staff Officer: Jonathan Hughes *co-opted Jan 2014

Central Academic-Related Staff Officer: Kate Servant

Regional/National Academic Staff Officer: Philip O'Sullivan

Regional/National Academic-Related Staff Officer: **vacancy**

Associate Lecturers Officer: Judy Ekins

Ordinary Members:

Jeni Aldridge
John Bennett
Chris Bollom
Eric Bowers
Gill Clough
Bruce Heil

David Houpt
Hilary Partridge
John Peters
Peter Piper
Nicolas van Labeke
Eric Wade

Photos of these people are on our branch website: www.ucu.open.ac.uk.

UCU National Exec Committee Members:

Pauline Collins, Lesley Kane and Roger Walters

Father of NUJ Chapel - vacancy

UCU resources

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 and we will send one to you—it all helps to raise awareness of the Union.

- Hessian bag
- Mug
- Lanyard—new OU branch ones just arrived!
- Pens
- Mouse mat
- Publicity posters



Branch meetings 2014

Future branch meeting dates are as follows and all members are welcome to attend:

Tues 11th March 2014 branch meeting at 12.30pm, Room B232, 2nd floor Wilson B block - motions to Congress
Tues 29th April 2014 branch meeting at 12.30pm, Room B232 - Congress amendments
Tuesday 23rd September 2014 branch meeting at 12.30pm, Room B232
Wednesday 19th November 2014 AGM at 12.30pm, Room B232