

The Open University Branch
of the University and College
Union

April 2021
Issue 3



AL Newsletter

Bulletin for AL UCU members at The
Open University



A Sad Loss: Roger Walters, OU UCU Branch President 2007-12

We are sad to report that former Branch President Roger Walters died on Thursday 25 February, aged 73. Here, Branch Officer Peter Piper provides a personal memorial note to Roger:

“Having known Roger for nearly 40 years, it is rather difficult to summarise all the stories that I can remember about him. Throughout this time, I always respected him as part of the OU council and as UCU president and did visit him quite frequently during the past few years after his illness although it was sad to see him getting much worse with his health.

Roger was Branch President of the OU Branch of the University and College Union from 2007 to 2012, he served on UCU’s National Executive Committee for many years and was a fanatical cricket, rugby and tennis fan. He was an amazing person, without him there would be no OUSA, no AL representation and there wouldn’t be a Graduates Association. He was instrumental in being involved with all these.

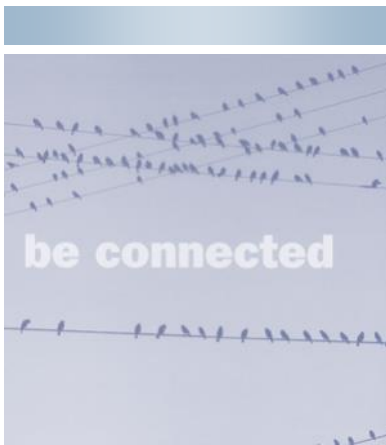
Roger had a great knowledge of meeting procedures, standing orders, constitutions and his knowledge of elections using the alternative vote was second to none.

....continued over



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Obituary on the [Chronicle & Echo website](#).

Roger's funeral took place on Monday 29th March – a video is available on the [Stadium website](#). Peter sang a special version of the State of the Union song in memory of his friend and colleague (you can find it at 18:41 minutes on the video).

Roger was highly pedantic and constantly reminded Deb (Branch Administrator) that she would have known a word or a grammatical rule, if she had Latin O level, like he did!

...continued A Sad Loss: Roger Walters

He knew everyone in the university and what they did utilising their talents when appropriate. In meetings he would take copious notes which to the rest of us, were totally illegible but the details were there in the minutes afterwards.

The first time I met Roger was at an OU weekend event held in Wolverton. I was introduced to him as an "important person" within the University. Roger wasn't staying over for this event so it was suggested, as I had a vehicle, that I could drop him off at Milton Keynes Central railway station. Roger said that his last train was quarter past midnight. A colleague of mine came with me and we arrived at the station at midnight. As we were walking along the concourse, Roger's briefcase burst open and the contents scattered everywhere. We looked at the board for platform number to note that his last train was quarter to midnight, not after. Nothing left for it now; I had to drive him to Northampton which was further than I thought.

There is the time we had to leave him in the Airport Lounge Bar (for those who can remember that) after an OU open day - likewise leaving him in the kitchen all night during an OUSA conference because nobody knew which room he was in.

The only time we had a disagreement was at an AL national meeting held at Harben House, Newport Pagnell. I was on his "steering committee" and it was decided (as most things were) that he would order a large barrel of beer as the in-house stuff wasn't to his liking. It was my role to ensure that this would be sufficiently consumed. Unfortunately, not only was the beer terrible but they put a surcharge on it. I decided to form the "escape committee" again and took a contingent down the road to the Bull pub. When we got back Roger was most annoyed with me, not only for disappearing but leaving him with the G&T and red wine drinkers. Roger never really forgave me for this.

There are countless other stories however.....The Open University and its constituent central staff, ALs and students, were his family. He enjoyed everyone's company so it is not surprising that his "partying" days are so memorable! It is appropriate therefore that he is now resting in a quiet corner in the graveyard of St Michaels church on the OU campus where he wanted to be."

Peter Piper, Honorary Treasurer and STEM AL

Simply Staggering: AL New Contract Delay

Following the announcement of a delay to the AL Contract in mid-March, ALs are appalled and devastated. A series of university webinars did not clear up questions asked – indeed they made things worse. A crucial starting point for any negotiations must be that ‘mitigations’ and the implementation date of August 2022 are legally binding, as otherwise there can be no trust.

Some of our AL members have given permission to present their stories and comments.

Dear UCU....

Many of us believed we were alone in suffering hardship because of the casualised portfolio of contracts which we worked on. At least ten years ago the university began to encourage us to collect these, in order to ready us for a full-time professional teaching role within the institution. With this hope in mind, and embarrassed to share the difficulties we experienced, we struggled through. In the last couple of weeks, we have heard from many who could not find secure housing because banks would not recognise our contracts as security for a mortgage. A lecturer from FBL said in one of the senior management's webinars that he was embarrassed when teaching about employment practices because he knew he was on such a poor set of contracts. A lecturer from WELS spoke of the irony of teaching about inclusive education while being discriminated against within the university's employment practices. At least one of us had to teach about a food bank which was the exact one that at times she feared having to turn to, to feed her child.

I've been working for the OU since 2009, and the promise of a permanent contract and pay for the summer months is what kept me here. I've been waiting so long! It seems beyond cruel to ask me to agree to the new contract, tell me what my salary is likely to be, confirm a date by which it will happen, and then pull it all away. How could any employer think it was acceptable to treat us this way?

I have been planning for two years and waiting much longer to have a permanent contract. I have based decisions on employment on the fact that I had been offered a FTE contract starting in October. As this has now been abandoned, not only do I have no job security but next year I may receive £12,915 less salary than I was offered. This has huge financial implications for me as a result of decisions I made based on being offered the contract. I feel that I am not valued at all by the University, I am not even referred to as staff in the email informing me that my contract has been cancelled.

...continued Dear UCU

My FTE was calculated to give me a £5K pay rise, which would have made a huge difference to my family's financial stability. Facing three months a year with no pay is difficult, and I've gone into debt in the past when I've not been given EMA marking. Every year I worry about whether or not I will get EMA marking, and then I am faced with the worry of redundancies or small groups reducing my pay. I was so relieved when I was told this was the last year that would happen!

I have been making material plans based on the new AL contract. Now not only am I facing the loss of the new, secure and uplifted salary, I will experience a sharp reduction in pay because my teach-out modules are ending and I have nothing to replace them.

Fifteen years ago I approached my line manager saying I wished to resign as an AL in order to get a 'proper job'. His response was that a permanent contract was 'in the pipeline' and that I should hold on. Believing him, I stayed on. I have now served the OU for 28 years on multiple contracts (280), many of them doing the work of full time staff. The permanent contract 'carrot' has been dangling in front of me for 15 years.



JOIN UCU

www.ucu.org.uk/join

Or join by phone: 0333
207 0719*

*Lines open 9.15am-
4.45pm Mon-Fri.

What's Happening with my Pay?

Pay for ALs and other OU staff falls under the remit of the Joint National Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES) where 145 HEIs in the UK negotiate on pay and some working conditions.

Full commentary on the 2020-2021 pay round can be found at this address <https://www.ucu.org.uk/he2020>

The 20/21 Pay claim submitted in March 2020 asked for inter alia RPI plus 5% rises, a rise in the minimum hourly rates, agreeing a framework to eliminate precarious employment practices and converting hourly paid staff onto fractional contracts.

In January 2021 the employers' side made a final response to this, which you can read in full on the UCU website.

When we get to the meat of the offer we find:

1. Adoption of the Voluntary Foundation Living Wage is a matter for individual institutions
2. There is a freeze on the uplift of the pay spine
3. Indefinite contracts should be the general form of employment



What this means in simple terms is you are being offered 0% as a pay rise to show gratitude for dealing with COVID, home schooling, looking after sick relatives, increased demands from students and innumerable IT changes that make our job harder. Using RPI, inflation is at least 0.8% so this is a real-terms cut (on top of 10 years of cuts) as energy bills and council tax and other costs go up.

 **UNIONS**

What's Going on with my Pension?

ALs can be members of USS ([Universities Superannuation Scheme](#)) which is a private pension scheme created by UCU (formerly AUT) and HE employers. This is a brief summary of some of the issues with links to places where you can access more detailed information.

There have been continuing attempts to turn USS away from a defined benefit system towards a defined contribution system. A defined benefit scheme is based on a mathematical formula and guaranteed. Moving to defined contributions means the value of your pension would be subject to the vagaries of the stock market. In other words, the risks would be moved from the employers to the employees. So UCU has fiercely resisted this.

One of the reasons given for these proposed changes is that valuation approaches can show a substantial deficit that depends on the methods used. UCU argues that the current approach does not accurately represent the strength of the scheme or its ability to cover liabilities. It is now claimed the deficit had risen to £18bn in 2020 (with a valuation 'snapshot' taken at March 2020 during the period of worst volatility during the pandemic). A former USS trustee/director and whistle-blower, Jane Hutton (Professor of Statistics at the University of Warwick), is one of those who has attacked this valuation approach. (You can read an interview with her here: <https://bit.ly/3bmreLP>). Given the deficit is the argument for benefit cuts, her argument that "the deficit is a fiction" is quite important.

Jane Hutton was dismissed from her role as non-executive director and her Employment Tribunal case for unfair dismissal is ongoing. You can read about this on her [blogpost](#) and the UCU reaction on the [UCU website](#).

If you wish to send messages of support to her, please do so via the OU UCU branch, ucu@open.ac.uk.

Following strike action in 2018, attempts to reach some sort of consensus on valuations led to the creation of a Joint Expert Panel whose members were appointed by UCU and Universities UK (representing the employers). It produced two reports, the second of which was published in December 2019 and looks at valuation possibilities: [view report](#).

[USS Briefs report](#)

Just want a short explanation? See this helpful set of 'bite-size' notes from University of Leeds UCU: <http://www.leedsucu.org.uk/uss-pensions-bite-sized>.

....continued over

....continued What's Going on with my Pension?

Universities UK is now proposing a series of benefits cuts similar to those rejected through strike action in 2018 and the OU is consulting staff about this. If a new agreement is not made in time, contribution rates in October 2021 will automatically rise to 11% of salary for employees and 23.7% for employers. This is not affordable for anyone and as Jane Hutton among others shows, it isn't necessary. Yet USS is insisting on a discredited valuation approach and a 'price' for benefits that is far too high. At the moment UUK is going along with this despite previously expressing significant concerns about the valuation approach.

You can read [UCU's response here](#).

So where do we go from here?

Please take any opportunity to tell the OU that we staff value USS and want to see its future secured through a sensible valuation approach that keeps defined benefits affordable for all. During the current consultation ALs will be paid for attending an information webinar if they wish to do so. UCU continues to press the OU, which is one of the largest members in the pension scheme, to seek a different valuation approach from USS.

For the latest from UCU see: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/strikeforuss>

OUBUCU Branch meetings

All UCU members are welcome to attend Branch meetings, the dates are all on our branch website:

<http://ucu.open.ac.uk/>



AL Representation - Opinion piece by an AL member

As the new AL contract (hopefully) looms into view the promise of the breaching of the boundaries between ALs and other staff is often made. For this to be a reality, presumably there will need to be some changes made in the OU Governance structures. A case could be made that ALs are under-represented there at present.

The ALA enables the views of ALs to be heard but it lacks the executive power embedded in the Senate and the Council. We therefore need to consider the level of AL representation in these two seats of power compared to representation of other academic groups.

To do this we need to look at how many ALs there are. The financial accounts released in July 2020 show that on an FTE basis, there are 4484 full time and part-time staff based at MK and other offices and 1149 ALs. In relation to the ALA, the 62 AL representatives thus mean 1 rep per 18 FTE. Exactly how many ALs there are remains a mystery but something like 4000 has been suggested.

What about Council and the Senate?

The Senate includes 57 representatives of the Academic and Research staff and 7 ALs “appointed by and from the AL Exec”. Clearly these people need to be among the members of the ALE who are elected from the 62 members of the ALA and this does tie the ALA/ALE directly into the Senate.

AL representation on the Council is even more limited. The Council includes 1 AL representative and 5 reps appointed by the Senate which must include 1 AL. These two AL reps also become members of the ALE. So, 4 to 2 overall.

So, if we compare internal (MK) Staff representation and AL representation on the two committees with real power (the Senate and the Council) it can be summarised like this:

Senate	Academic/ Research	ALs	Ratio
FASS	13	2	x 6.5
FBL	5	1	x 5
STEM	19	2	x 9.5
WELS	12	2	x 6.0
Other	4	0	-
Regional/National	4	0	-
Council	4	2	x 2
Total	61	9	x 6.7

From this it appears that ALs are structurally under-represented on the key governance structures in the OU. While ratios up to 4.0 might be acceptable, anything above that is structural under-representation.

Report: Staying Power by Dr Nicola Rollock

Latest figures from Advance HE indicate that there are 85 Black Professors within UK higher education institutions. This group make up 0.6% – the smallest proportion of the UK Professoriate. Only 4.6% of all Black faculty occupy this senior level role compared with 11.2% of white faculty who hold this position (Advance HE, 2018). In other words, white academics are almost two and a half times more likely to be Professors than their Black counterparts. This corresponds with findings from UCU that White academics are approximately three times as successful in their applications for Professorship when compared with their peers from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds (UCU, 2012). The data are starker when disaggregated by gender. Just 25 UK Black Professors are women

In Staying Power, a report commissioned by UCU Dr Nicola Rollock interviewed 20 of these women about their experiences. Her findings present a stark picture of racial and gender inequalities in HE in the UK today. These findings should be circulated and used as a starting point for improving academic recruitment and promotion in UK Higher Education.



UCU International Section

Trade Unionism is based on joining together so we are stronger and so the weak are not isolated. While international solidarity cannot be guaranteed and may take time to develop, it should be part of the role of Trade Unions and we wish to celebrate this here. UCU has often sought to involve itself in relevant international issues, so this edition of the AL newsletter highlights some struggles around the world we think are worthy of note. UCU has an international section and more information about its extensive work can be found at <https://www.ucu.org.uk/internationalmore>. It is also a member of the global union Education International: <https://www.ei-ie.org/>

Here are three current issues with a high profile at the moment.

Campaigning for human rights in Egypt

UCU is supporting the campaign for the release of political prisoners in Egypt who have been jailed for their activities in support of workers' rights.

Egypt Solidarity Initiative has background information on six cases [here](#).

UCU continues to campaign for the truth about the death of Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge PhD student who was murdered while doing research in Egypt in 2016. On the fifth anniversary of Giulio's disappearance, Cambridge Amnesty Group - with the support of Cambridge UCU - hosted an online vigil for Giulio.

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/vigil-murdered-student-giulio-regeni-egyptian-embassy-london>

Solidarity with staff and students at Boğaziçi University in Turkey

On 1 January 2021, a new university president - Professor Melih Bulu - was appointed as a result of a Presidential Decree. Professor Melih Bulu has close connections to President Erdoğan's ruling AKP party and is not from Boğaziçi's own academic community.

Staff and students at Boğaziçi have strongly criticised the decision as an attack on academic freedom and university autonomy. A number of students have also been detained by police for protesting against the new appointment.

UCU has called for the immediate release of all students who have been detained for exercising their democratic right to protest. The union expresses its solidarity with staff and students at Boğaziçi University - and throughout Turkey - in their defence of academic freedom, university autonomy and democracy. [UCU website press release](#)continued over

The Secret AL: the Secret Diary of Ann Ayell, aged 53¾

Friday January 1st

These are my New Year's Resolutions

1. I will not start on the gin before it gets dark (note – review this one before summer).
2. I will not look at my emails at midnight. Or if I do, I won't answer them then.
3. I will also not look at the ALCR at midnight. And in particular I won't get involved in debates.
4. I will get a cleaner house by finding something I hate more than housework, for which housework will be suitable procrastination. Maybe I need to apply for a new module with long essays to mark?



Monday January 4th

Well I was in the "what day is it" post-Christmas mist.

But the OU kindly brought me right out of that. Not only the normal crop of Monday emails updating me on CSR, telling me someone's posted on Yammer, reminding me I've not returned the TMAs I downloaded two days ago etc, but two weeks' accumulated randomness.

Thinking of adding:

Resolution 5: Do not feel compelled to read every single email just in case it has something of interest buried in paragraph 97.

Thursday January 7th

Well, I've only broken one resolution so far. Of course I got emails at 11:59 pm asking for extensions for the two sets of TMAs due yesterday. I looked at them.... And I answered them. I am such a soft touch!

Sunday January 10th

I've cracked it for resolution 4! And I didn't even need to find a new module. The marking scheme for this TMA is annoying– both too prescriptive and too vague at the same time. But I can now see my carpet is actually blue not grey!

Wednesday January 13th

First "do I actually have to do this activity for this TMA" email. So hard not to reply "No, of course not. I will get them to write an entirely different TMA just for you". I did the "well, this is what it costs you in marks if you miss this out" and "this is the consequence" conversation. Response: "But I want a distinction". Well... better do the activity then, eh?

....continued over

...continued The Secret AL: the Secret Diary of Ann Ayell,

Saturday January 16th

Ooh how exciting! I got to play the “Adobe Connect Glitches Fruit machine” this morning.... this time I got not only the auto-advancing slides I’ve come to know so well, and the auto-unmuting mics, but also a whole new thing – the amazing disappearing bullet points. Jackpot!
I have now broken Resolution No. 1



Monday January 18th

Wooohooo! Two B groups coming my way!
I haven’t dared look at the TMA clashes yet... if I don’t think about clashes, they’ll go away, right?
But hey, why am I planning? Over half of my students are needing extensions anyway.

Thursday Jan 21st

I am a failure. Have now broken all the resolutions...
In my defence, I was provoked!
Revised target... don’t respond to emails while actually drinking the gin!

OpenLearn hub on Race and Ethnicity

Contributions are being sought for the OpenLearn hub on Race and Ethnicity. Please contact Ayesha Peeran for full details and a list of the kinds of article wanted (with examples). OpenLearn are especially keen to have material for LGBT+ history month, South Asian Heritage month and impact of COVID-19.

Contributions are welcome from all staff; ALs and Professional Services staff will get a small fee, depending on the contribution. All submissions are subject to a peer review and editing process and final decisions lie with the Race and Ethnicity hub group. You can also contribute by becoming a critical reader.

Ayesha Peeran can be contacted on ayesha.peeran@open.ac.uk.



UCU Training information

UCU runs Continuing Professional Development training for individuals, as well as training for union roles like Caseworkers, Green Representatives or Equality Representatives.

Courses are an enjoyable way to get more from your membership, and to learn how colleagues can support each other. They are currently online during the pandemic, but usually face-to-face in a regional venue which allows members from different branches to meet. Please contact the office at ucu@open.ac.uk if you see training you would like to undertake.

Reps and Activists Courses plus other UCU training information:

www.ucu.org.uk/training

UK-wide

[Representing individual members: an introduction to casework, 24, June, 1,8,15, July](#)

[Mental health is a trade union issue: 8,15,22, July](#)

[Green New deal bargaining: 9, 16, 23 June](#)

Scotland only

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/4806/Courses-in-Scotland>

[Risk assessment: No return until safe, 23, 30, April & 7, May](#)

[H&S 2: Bargaining and organising for health and safety, 12, 19, 26, May 2,9, June](#)

[Rep 1: UCU reps induction, 24 May, 7, 14, 21, June](#)

[Rep 2: Representing UCU members: Handling complex cases, 4, 11, 18, 25, June](#)



What do you want to read about in future issues?

Please email ucu@open.ac.uk with ideas for articles in future issues of this newsletter, we are planning to send 3 issues per year. You can either suggest articles you would like to read or articles you would like to write and contribute.

OU Branch of UCU AL reps committee, 2020-2021

Some members of our AL Reps committee sit on the Editorial Board of this newsletter. The Newsletter is primarily written by ALs for ALs. As a UCU communication, it does stress the progressive traditions of the Labour and Trade Union movement but also provides a space to discuss and debate issues of interest. We may label articles 'Opinion pieces' or 'Based on personal experience' or similar. The Editorial Board reserves the right to make changes to articles but will seek the consent of authors for any major changes when doing so.

Current members of the Editorial Board: Richard Bradbury, Cath Brown, Mark Kirby, Hilary Partridge, John Pearson, Anita Pilgrim.

Our AL Reps committee meets regularly to discuss current AL issues. The committee has standing orders on our [branch website](#). The UCU AL Reps committee is organised by OU regions. Please contact the UCU office at ucu@open.ac.uk if you are interested in becoming an AL Rep.

Current members of the AL Reps' Committee: Costas Athanasopoulos, Eric Bowers, Richard Bradbury, Cath Brown, Judy Ekins, Almut Gadow, Bruce Heil, Lesley Kane, Mark Kirby, Mike McNulty, Isabella Muzio, Hilary Partridge, John Pearson, John Peters, Jason Phillips, Anita Pilgrim, Peter Piper, Jeremy Roebuck and Gerry Stroud.

Please note: articles by local authors are written by ALs unless otherwise specified.

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