

Open Letter to OU Students

Between 25 November-29 November and 2-4 December, UCU members at the Open University will be taking industrial action. This follows a breakdown of negotiations over a series of issues, including pensions, equality and pay. We wish to emphasise that this dispute is with our employers and the pension administrators. We regret very much that this will affect students, so we wish to explain why we felt we had to take this step.

At UCU's request, pay deducted from staff observing the strike will be donated to the OU's Student Study Support Fund to help those suffering financial hardship. While in traditional universities students are often not informed beforehand, at the OU the union is advising Associate Lecturers to notify students of the strike action in advance.

We do not take this action lightly, but conditions for staff in universities have deteriorated over many years. The average workload for full-time staff is 50 hours a week, with 1 in 4 academics reporting higher figures and administrators suffering in a similar way. It has become clear that current university staffing models are based on very significant overwork, and this is leading to a mental health crisis across the sector.

That crisis closely mirrors the rise seen in student mental health issues, and we think they are directly related, since staff are under so much pressure that they don't have sufficient time adequately to support students and develop their careers.

Pay has also fallen dramatically in real terms against inflation (21% over 10 years) and this is hitting staff unequally: the HE sector has very high gender and ethnicity pay gaps that are not being addressed. While train fares and housing keep becoming more expensive, and workload has mounted, pay keeps falling against inflation.

Another way to express this is that compared to where we were 10 years ago, staff at the OU are routinely working nearly 7 days a week while being paid for about 4.

Staff are also on strike over pensions, which are deferred pay, despite the fact that there was a sustained strike on this issue in 2018. At that time OU staff took strike action for 14 days in order to defend our Defined Benefits scheme. Defined Benefits means you have a guaranteed pension based on what you've paid in. Defined Contributions, which was the change that employers were trying to force on UCU members, are instead a gamble based on stock market performance, with no guarantees. That 2018 strike over the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) was successful in putting a stop to the immediate move to Defined Contributions, and it was ended by the creation of a Joint Expert Panel.

However, the recommendations of the panel's first report have largely been ignored. UCU members believe that this means the scheme could be at risk again in future. Also, UCU believes the valuation of the pension uses discredited, inappropriate

methods. This in turn means staff members are being asked to pay for unnecessary contribution rises.

Those hikes amount to 1.6% of salary while the pay offer from our employers this year is only 1.8%. That leaves only 0.2% as a pay rise (a 2.5% fall in real terms). There are fears of further substantial hikes very soon. In addition UCU has raised very serious concerns about the governance and management of the USS.

In short, UCU/USS members are suffering another real-terms pay cut after 10 years of declining pay, while pension contributions are becoming unaffordable for reasons that have been challenged by academic and industry experts.

Taken together, these attacks on pay, pensions, and working conditions represent an existential threat to the sector as a whole. It's a situation that is driving new academics out of the sector and leaving those remaining ill and demoralised. At the OU, UCU handles casework for staff who have been on temporary contracts over a decade, despite being considered experts in their field. You deserve to be supported by staff who have adequate job security, fair pay and work/life balance to allow them to bring their very best to the teaching mission of the university and to their work on your behalf. When a university fails its staff, it's failing you, too.

UCU has always stood with students in opposition to tuition fees and the commercialisation of higher education. This is why the National Union of Students is supporting the strike and suggesting that students write to Vice-Chancellors to ask them to get back to the negotiating table with UCU. <https://www.ucu.org.uk/UCU-NUS-jointstatement>

While the OU has made some progress on particular issues, such as promising the Associate Lecturers job security through a new contract, the larger picture in the sector is very poor. In some parts of HE up to 75% of teaching staff are on fixed-term, hourly or atypical contracts, without proper job security. Excessive workloads, precarious contracts, poor morale: all of these harm staff and thus the support we are able to provide to students. We know a strike is very hard, but we are taking this action so that the next generation of students and staff can have fundamentally better learning and working conditions.

We will be doing teach-outs at the Alternative University of the Air from Monday: <http://AltUniAir.shor.tn/live>

NUS/UCU Video about the action: <https://youtu.be/cnVe-aXan8Y?rel=0>

From the Executive Committee, Open University Branch of UCU
<http://ucu.open.ac.uk/>