

Open Letter to Professor Tim Blackman, Vice-Chancellor, The Open University

UCU members at the Open University are saddened by the decision to push ahead with strike pay deductions in May, June and July.

The decision to strike is never taken lightly, and the staff who took action anticipated there would be financial consequences. We appreciated that our request for deductions to be phased over several months was agreed. However, the world has changed completely since the OU strike action concluded on 10 March. This is why universities such as St Andrews, Newcastle, Birkbeck, KCL, UCL, the University of Liverpool and Southampton have recognised the new reality and suspended deductions. We urge you to reconsider the OU's hard-hearted decision. Let us be quite clear: we are NOT asking for the withdrawal of the deductions but rather their suspension during what we are told again and again are 'unprecedented and extremely challenging times'.

The COVID-19 crisis means that many colleagues are suddenly supporting family members and partners who have lost their jobs, destroying their financial planning. Some have unexpected caring responsibilities, have fallen ill, or have lost friends and family. The economic forecasts are dire, suggesting we are entering a period that could be worse than the Great Depression.

At the same time the demands on staff have been extraordinary. The university has repeatedly acknowledged that staff have been working all hours to keep things running and support students. Or as the Pro-Chancellor said, 'What you have achieved through your collegiality, collaboration and your selfless dedication is nothing short of remarkable'.

The message of the university's anniversary Charter Day video and your recent email to staff was that kindness is this community's key value. This decision undermines that message. Our members have gone above and beyond to provide world-class distance education to OU students in the most difficult circumstances, sometimes while enduring significant hardship themselves. Pushing ahead with deductions rather than postponing seems to contradict this much-repeated message, and appears cold and uncaring.

The Open University prides itself on being a compassionate employer with good industrial relations. We urge you to consider the destructive effect this decision is having on staff morale. It would be an appropriate and supportive gesture to acknowledge the heroic efforts of staff, and the financial uncertainty many face, by postponing strike pay deductions.

Open University branch of UCU Executive Committee

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