

# Soap Box – The OU UCU Academic-Related Staff newsletter

April 2021



Welcome to the Spring edition of Soap Box. I'm David and I am your Branch Academic-Related Staff Officer. I hope you find this edition interesting and informative. Our branch actively represents your interests and we are always keen to hear your views and opinions. In this newsletter you will find a survey that canvasses your views on the reopening of OU sites. We would like to get as much feedback as possible so please feel free to share this newsletter or the link to the survey with anyone who is in an Academic-related or Professional Services role at the OU. UCU represents those on Grades 7 and above while UNISON covers administrative, clerical and technical staff up to and including Grade 6.

## In this edition of Soap Box:

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- Highlights of UCU General Secretary Jo Grady appearance on Question Time
- Remembering Roger Walters
- USS Pensions

I hope you were able to have an excellent few days off over the Easter period and please do get in contact with me ([David.conway1@open.ac.uk](mailto:David.conway1@open.ac.uk)) or the main OU UCU mailbox ([ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk)) if you ever need to discuss anything.

Best wishes

David Conway

UCU Central Academic-Related Staff Officer



## JOIN UCU

*Are you reading this and now wish to become a UCU member? [Click here to join today.](#)*

*What would you like to know about (or tell us about) in the OU branch UCU?*

*If you're not already in UCU, is there anything that might make you more interested in becoming a member?*

Is there something you can tell us about what's happening in the OU and that you think others may wish to know? Contact [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk).



## **We're in your corner**

National UCU and your local OU branch support members in many ways. In addition to representing your interests, we aim to ensure that everyone is treated fairly, we campaign on issues such as pay, workload and conditions, we influence the direction of the OU and are a home for our members. A great example of how our branch has positively influenced the OU recently is the increasing number of wellbeing-related activities that are being organised. There have been communications from our branch to OU management expressing how more needed to be done to support staff mental wellbeing during the pandemic. These points contributed towards numerous positive actions being taken in several units.

Our reps and caseworkers are a vital part in how we support members. Here are 2 short case studies from members explaining how their rep or caseworker supported them during difficult times:

*"Following a recruitment process for a new position at the OU, I was given a verbal offer and informed I was successful. Subsequently, the manager who had made the offer told me he was unable to offer me the position, due to the fact that a qualification I had made clear I was pursuing as part of my application was not yet completed. I spoke to my rep, who advised me on how to approach the issue with HR. As a result, the offer was reinstated".*

*"Several years ago, my unit at the OU was disbanded at the same time as 2 family bereavements. The move to my new unit placed me under a huge amount of stress and I was given no support by my line manager. I was off work sick and was put on a Sickness Support Plan. Whilst my caseworker could not stop the Sickness Support Plan, she was able to help me develop a plan to deal with my new circumstances. I feel safer as a UCU member and know UCU is there for me if the worst was to happen".*

If you are having problems at work, you can talk to one of our trained caseworkers for advice. Complete a [Casework request form](#) and send it to [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk), or phone our branch administrator, Deb Shann on 01908 653069 or deb.shann on Skype for business.



## Return to site survey

Over the next few months, it is expected that plans will be made by senior management regarding the return to site. It is important for the unions to know how staff feel about returning to site, as well as if any additional steps can be taken which will make staff feel more comfortable about any return to site-working.

**We invite all Academic-related staff (members and non-members) to complete the survey which can be accessed using the link below:**

[https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=VdQuDq-WAEG-06jl\\_ZgWhbX8xvgOt6dChb3xLOhrFQ1UMIJOQ0ZJRE8xM0JMSDNaVDNITIVBM1RLTy4u](https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=VdQuDq-WAEG-06jl_ZgWhbX8xvgOt6dChb3xLOhrFQ1UMIJOQ0ZJRE8xM0JMSDNaVDNITIVBM1RLTy4u)

Your feedback counts and help to influence OU decisions. We would highly appreciate your time in completing the short survey, which should take no longer than 10 minutes.

## AL new contract implementation

The OU UCU branch was informed on the 18th March without warning that the AL contract implementation had been halted by VCE. This follows 7 years of work and comes more than 2 years after the successful ballot. It is a betrayal of promises made about ending precarious work for ALs.

At the time of writing this newsletter, we have begun urgent negotiations on AL job security and avoiding financial loss. The university has indicated a willingness to work with us. We are also talking about the details of how the contract or any temporary transitional arrangement can be implemented.

It is important that we stand in solidarity with our AL colleagues on this issue and show to OU management that their actions have been unacceptable.

## UCU academic-related and professional staff conference – 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021

David Conway attended the Academic Related and Professional Services conference (ARPS) on the 18<sup>th</sup> March. He has also been elected to the national ARPS committee which will meet throughout the year. David said *“Participating at ARPS was a great experience and a good opportunity to learn more about national issues which are effecting academic-related and professional services staff working in HE. Many of the challenges we face at the OU such as an increasing workload are*

felt elsewhere, and it was really interesting to discover how other branches are responding. I look forward to working with others from UCU as part of the committee and plan to represent our branch's interests actively as a member".

## Taking care of yourself, mental health tips

UCU has updated a poster addressing mental health issues during the pandemic and you can download our latest tips here. [Layout 1 \(ucu.org.uk\)](https://www.ucu.org.uk)

### Taking care of yourself

**1. PAUSE**  
Take time out to assess how you feel. Keeping a diary can help you to monitor changes to your physical and mental health.

**2. AVOID BURNOUT**  
Make a weekly plan. This can help with managing workloads, stress and anxiety. Schedule exercise breaks and non-work activities.

**3. SCREEN TIME**  
Try not to stay too long on screen. Take regular breaks and use a blue light filter on your monitor to reduce the harmful blue light that can cause eye fatigue, blurred vision and headaches.

**4. STAY CONNECTED**  
Keep in touch with friends and family. Form supportive networks.

**5. PERSPECTIVE**  
Try not to overthink events. You have no control over the decisions being made during the pandemic. Step back, breathe and relax.

**6. AVOID NEWS OVERLOAD**  
Limit time watching the news. Delete unhelpful messages which spread misinformation and lead to stress and anxiety.

**YOU'RE DOING GREAT!**  
These are unusual times but you are not alone. Remember that you are appreciated and you are valued. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it. If you are feeling overwhelmed, contact:

- 999
- The Samaritans [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org) 116 123 (Free call)
- MIND [www.mind.org.uk/0300 123 3393](http://www.mind.org.uk/0300 123 3393)
- Education Support [www.educationsupport.org.uk](http://www.educationsupport.org.uk) 08000 562 561 (free call) 07909 341 229 (text phone)
- Women's Aid [www.womensaid.org](http://www.womensaid.org)
- Refuge [www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk) [info@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:info@womensaid.org.uk)
- Black African & Asian Therapy Network <https://www.baatan.org.uk/free-services>
- Switchboard <https://switchboard.lgbt>
- LGBT Foundation <https://lgbt.foundation/helpline>

Finally, don't forget to check out all UCU's Covid-19 related guidance for members at: [www.ucu.org.uk/coronavirus](http://www.ucu.org.uk/coronavirus)

## Upcoming UCU training

### Reps and Activists Courses

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/training>

### UK-wide

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

[Running online branch meetings: increasing participation, 20 April](#)

[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](#)

## Jo Grady on Question Time highlights

UCU's General Secretary, Jo Grady, appeared on BBC Question Time on 25<sup>th</sup> February. She answered questions on the PPE shortage, the idea of summer schools for student catch-up, vaccination passports, and the lack of government support for workers throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

Jo Grady on Question Time: [YouTube](#)

<https://ucu.org.uk/article/11426/Question-Time-highlights>

## Remembering Roger Walters – “a Cellar bar legend”

Roger was Branch President of the OU Branch of UCU from 2007 to 2012, served on UCU's National Executive Committee for many years and was a fanatical cricket, rugby and tennis fan. He passed away on 25<sup>th</sup> February and his funeral took place at Walton Hall on 29<sup>th</sup> March. A video of the funeral on the Stadium website can be accessed for the next 6 weeks. The branch will host a memorial event in the summer.

[Roger Walters - Funeral Ceremony - Berrill Stadium \(open.ac.uk\)](#)

Obituary and online Guest book: <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/northamptonchron-uk/obituary.aspx?n=roger-walters&pid=197928999>

Intranet news item: [Remembering Roger Walters \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

## USS Pensions update

A new dispute is brewing over the 2020 valuation of the USS pension scheme, which uses discredited methodology and a snapshot of the scheme taken at March 2020 (during the maximum volatility caused by the pandemic). A more reasonable approach to the valuation shows the scheme is 'cashflow positive' (it can cover outgoings easily) and healthy for the long term. There is no need for large contribution rises. However, Universities UK (UUK) has launched a consultation with employers in USS seeking ways to cut benefits—almost exactly the same proposal that was rejected by UCU through strike action in 2018.

The university's consultation will run until 24 May 2021. We encourage all staff to take the opportunity to tell the OU to rethink these proposals because all of us value an affordable defined-benefits scheme which is what USS should provide.

For further information on the problems with the valuation and why cuts to our benefits are unnecessary, see this helpful video from University of Leeds UCU. [The USS pension scheme 2020 valuation - UCU University of Leeds Branch \(leedsucu.org.uk\)](#)

The Leeds branch has also produced a great Q&A to explain what's happening with USS: [USS pensions - bite-sized - UCU University of Leeds Branch \(leedsucu.org.uk\)](#)

## OU Events

The branch would like to be involved in more OU events! Please email [ucu@open.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@open.ac.uk) if there's an event happening in your department or area that we could be part of. We miss standing in the wind tunnel and meeting new colleagues!

## Contact information

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