

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

The Spark — July 2014



OU Regional campaign

Campaign Activity

Recordings of the two radio interviews given by Paula James are now on the branch website on a new Campaigns page: <http://ucu.open.ac.uk/campaigns>.

Letter on the Times Higher Education website: <http://bit.ly/1sUgrPf>. Article on the Times Higher Education website that appeared on 20th June in response to the Guardian letter: <http://bit.ly/1ka7hER> and Letter published in The Guardian, 19 June 2014: <http://bit.ly/1z4XOIU>.



The regional and national **structure** of the **OU is unique**. It's **central to our success** in teaching quality, recruitment, retention, community partnerships, public engagement and research impact.

The **recent announcement** of the closure of Region 13 and a subsequent 'Regional Analysis' **place this structure under threat**.

On 2 April, Senate voiced deep concern about the potential implications for staff and students, and the lack of transparency in the decision. In this case, the academic 'voice' went unheeded. Council has acted as if academic questions about the potential long-term effects on teaching models, student support, central academic working, and management of associate lecturers are irrelevant.

Senate represents the academic voice of the university and taking the long-term view of the OU's health and mission should mean celebrating and strengthening the regional structures—as numerous previous reviews have concluded.

As a key 'stakeholder', Senate should:

- continue to champion the regions and our regional staff
- insist that academic concerns be at the core of any regional review
- raise questions about timing and logic behind the proposed closure of R13, and why it can't be kept open until the review takes place. Investigation suggests the immediate costs will be enormous, other office space was available, and the OU risks losing superb staff and local profile for no long-term benefit
- hold Council and the senior managers of the university to account for failing to take due consideration of Senate and Senate's concerns.

STOP PRESS: Two years ago the university and the UCU branch agreed on the AL Interim Agreement, which gave some degree of job protection at level 1 and fairer pay to ALs with group sizes at 115% to 129%. It was agreed by around 95% of AL members in a ballot, and went down in history as one of the few occasions when the university got some things right with ALs.

Management has now stated their intention to end this agreement without negotiating on what will follow this October, and has yet to engage in meaningful consultation on avoiding AL redundancies. The UCU branch is taking this very seriously and members will be provided with updates as the situation becomes clearer. See page 2 for further information on these AL issues.

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Serious AL issues

We reported in an email on 19th June to all our AL members, that discussions to improve the current AL contract have not been going well, in discussions with the university through the AL Working Group (ALWG) despite some earlier optimism. However, the University has now indicated a wish to restart negotiations on a new AL contract. We believe that if that is to have any chance of success then there needs to be a resolution to some outstanding issues that the ALWG was trying to resolve and a firm commitment from the university to improving the working conditions of ALs as indicated below. The key issues outstanding that we need to see resolved now, in preparation for the October 2014 modules, are as follows.

The Interim Agreement

The intention is to remove the "AL interim agreement" that was agreed two years ago. This was initially implemented to limit the impact of falling student numbers on AL job losses. We wanted the agreement to continue for a further year until there is better confidence that student numbers have stabilised. We continue to press for this and the University has agreed to consider again their planning numbers with us. We need to understand better what the likely impact on AL contract losses may be. Should the university fail to shift on this and the job losses are likely to be substantial then we will be seeking the support of members for industrial action.



Group Sizes

There is a lack of clarity on what may be the normal group size should the interim agreement go. We are seeking an assurance that line managers (Staff Tutors) will be guided to load to no more than 100%, unless absolutely essential and should loading above 100% be necessary, we want to ensure that this will not continue into consecutive years. We are currently in discussion with the University on this issue.

For the Future

One key improvement to the existing contract we were seeking through the ALWG was job security. Our discussions towards greater job security have been through a better definition of successor modules but this has been stopped as apparently getting agreement from faculties was proving problematic. The university has indicated that they still wish to work towards greater job security and we have asked for a statement of commitment from them. This will be an essential pre-requisite to new AL contract discussions. The problem of getting faculty commitment also has to be resolved before new contract discussions can start. Management need to be able to speak with one voice. A further issue within the current contract has been consistency in interpretation across the faculties. One issue we have been trying to get agreement on is the expected response time from ALs to student queries. Again getting faculty agreement on this has proved problematic. A consistent interpretation of a future contract has to be a prerequisite for a new contract.

There will be discussions over the summer towards new contract negotiations. From our side we will need the guidance of members on what key improvements are needed. Two obvious ones are better job security through continuity of employment and the rate of pay for the job. As the demand for better retention increases, the already abused time commitment of ALs needs to be paid for. There will be other improvements needed but an essential requirement will be an assurance that the university will act as one body and that faculties will fully implement what is agreed. We do not want faculties to be able to reinterpret contractual requirements in different ways to the detriment of AL Working conditions.

Bruce Heil, Exec member and AL rep for Scotland

OU branch of UCU creates a Facebook account

The branch has created a Facebook account – the following link will only work if you have a Facebook account, to login to, and so far we've got 48 friends (3 July 2014): <https://www.facebook.com/oubranch.ucu>. Our Twitter account is now linked to the Facebook account so any tweets will also appear on the Facebook page.



New OU Agile working policy

UCU welcomes the OU's commitment to flexible working and the acknowledgement that working practices are much more than the time and place of work. Unit Representatives attending the launch on 17th June were told that from the 30th June, all employees are able to request agile working, which involves requesting changes to working arrangements, either on a temporary or permanent basis.



Both internal and external speakers highlighted examples of where "agile working" proved to be an effective business tool which helped attract and retain a diverse and talented workforce, helped to manage work flow and reduce absenteeism, whilst supporting individual employees reduce stress, improve job satisfaction and achieve a work/life balance. The policy, guidance and request form are published on the HR intranet under Flexible/Agile Working in the [Policies, Procedures, Forms](#) section.

Flexible working, however, has not always been embraced universally at the OU and the experience of many of our members has been negative, leaving them feeling the process has been both inequitable and unfair. UCU sincerely hopes that this new policy will see a change in mind-set throughout the University. The branch will monitor the implementation of policy and procedures. Members are asked to feedback their experience and to let us know when requests are refused and the reason for this. Contact: ucu@open.ac.uk.

You can access a [video message from the Vice-Chancellor](#) about the launch of Agile Working at the OU on OU Podcasts.

The policy, guidance and request form are published on the HR intranet under Flexible/Agile Working in the [Policies, Procedures, Forms](#) section. An introductory leaflet is also available on the [HR intranet news page](#). If you have any queries, you should raise these with your line manager in the first instance. Your manager can obtain further guidance from representatives in your unit that attended a briefing earlier this month. Further advice for managers on interpretation of the policy is available from HR Partners.

Regional/National Academic-Related staff officer co-opted

We are pleased to report that the UCU rep in Bristol has now been co-opted onto our Exec Committee—Liz White has been an active rep who has attended branch meetings, a branch Away day and she is also a trained Caseworker. Liz has filled the vacancy that we had for a Regional/National Academic-Related Staff officer.

Branch motion goes to UCU Congress 2014

The following motion was passed at the branch meeting on 11th March and went to the UCU Congress in May 2014. The branch sent 4 delegates to Congress this year: Bruce Heil, Lesley Kane, Meridian and Eric Wade. NEC members Pauline Collins and Roger Walters also attended. The union's annual Congress took place on 29th and 30th May in Manchester and you can read motions passed and decisions made at this address: www.ou.ac.uk/congress2014.



The Zero hours contract campaign and definition of zero hours

"Congress resolves that all contracts that do not guarantee minimum hours or a minimum quantity of paid work (including for example the contracts offered to Open University Associate Lecturers) should be considered zero hours contracts and unacceptable atypical work contracts, and included in the campaign against zero hours contracts."

Proposed: Costas Athanasopoulos, Seconded: Lesley Kane



Costas, our Equality Officer, makes a statement about his feelings regarding his terms of employment as an AL; he feels that his existence in the OU is as precarious as the English pirates existence fighting against the Spanish Armada!

Further information about the UCU campaign to stamp out casual contracts: <http://www.ou.ac.uk/stampout>.

There is a UCU report on the Use of Zero hours contracts at this address: <http://bit.ly/R6qLCy>.

April 2014 - Lobby of Parliament on Funding Cuts

Hundreds of UCU members attended this event, many of us with a brief from our own branches to raise the way funding cuts are affecting the front line in Further, Higher, and Adult education.

My own MP was not available to speak with me, so I chose to take part in the meeting organised in Committee Room 1, which had been booked for us by Paul Blomfield MP who was on the platform with Simon Renton (UCU national past president) and a speaker representing the NUS.

Paul Blomfield outlined how the funding system introduced by the Con-Dem government had been intended to last for a generation, but is already running into difficulty, and looks like being more expensive than the previous system.

In response to questions from the floor, it was explained that Labour's alternative was likely to be some form of progressive graduate tax. Paul Blomfield argued that this would be simple to administer, and fairer since it would take payment in proportion to how much money graduates make, rather than in proportion to the cost of their courses.

At this point there were further questions from the floor:

- i. Why should citizens have to pay for their education at all? Big business benefits from the production of graduates, and the economic benefits of education should be taken from the income generated as a result, and not changed to the individuals.
- ii. Why are all the arguments about economics, because the value of education does not lie solely in generating wealth?

Paul Blomfield agreed with the second point, but said it was useful to show that the government's view of the economics of education was mistaken.

At that point, I was able to speak, very briefly, about the impact of the funding cuts and higher fees on my own institution, the Open University. I started by highlighting the 40% fall in enrolments of part-time students in Higher Education, and said that the OU had been hit by this, to an extent no other institution had. Amongst other things being lost we are threatened with the closure of OU regional centres in England, starting with East Grinstead, and the possibility of Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, and others to follow.

As an Open University tutor I had worked with students in very difficult conditions: - some in prison; some virtual prisoners in their own homes due either to medical or social reasons; some terminally ill. If the Open University is lost, or forced to abandon its mission, there will be a high price to pay, both in economic *and* non-economic terms. Loss of access to education results in increased social hopelessness and human misery, which will manifest itself in social problems, including increased crime rates.

Simon Renton spoke at the end of the meeting and contrasted today's problems with the social progress made in the past: the setting up of the NHS; social housing; education free at the point of use, and student grants. He explained that he had returned to full-time education in his twenties and now teaches history at UCL. This would not have been a practical option if today's system of fees and loans had been around when he returned to education.

The trade union movement has not been strong enough to defend the social gains of the past, and we must now find the strength to turn the tide.

Lesley Kane, Honorary Secretary

NB – further information about the lobby is on the UCU website: www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=6988



The lobby was supported by Paul Blomfield MP (middle) and UCU President Simon Renton (left).

Two new UCU reps have volunteered

The branch is very pleased to report that two new UCU reps have come forward. John Busvine has agreed to be the Publicity Contact for MCT faculty in the Jennie Lee Building. Alison Penn from HSC has also volunteered to be a second rep in the HSC faculty, Alison is based at East Grinstead. We still need reps in the following OU units and in the Oxford regional centre: BDU, Development Office, Estates, Finance, HR and Student Services. Please contact the branch office if you could take on this role: ucu@open.ac.uk or 01908 6(53069).

East Grinstead press release—staff version

A Press release written by UCU Press office was sent to media contacts in the South East on 19th May — the following version was created by UCU members in the Campaigns group.

East Grinstead Centre to close with potential loss of 64 jobs

The executive body of the Open University (OU) has agreed to implement plans to close the university's regional centre in East Grinstead.

The plans announced on Tuesday 13th May leave 64 jobs at risk and the University and College Union (UCU) says the closure has serious consequences for the Open University's hugely successful regional network.

In March the University's academic deliberative body, the Senate, voted overwhelmingly against the closure. Two petitions organised by staff have attracted more than 1300 signatures in support of keeping East Grinstead open and maintaining the OU's regional structure.

In recent years regional and national centres across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have allowed students access to teaching and support, while at the same time benefitting from the IT revolution. This 'blended' learning has become a hallmark of the OU's teaching, and helped maintain its position as the leading distance-learning university in the world. UCU says strong regional centres must be maintained to allow students the vital element of face-to-face teaching and help.

The latest developments in online learning also demonstrate the importance of opportunities for face-to-face interaction and local support. A recent article by the BBC suggests that mass online course providers are catching up to the OU in discovering that personal learning interactions remain crucial to student satisfaction and success.

The union said it has serious concerns about compulsory job losses following the move and said if staff members are offered redeployment opportunities in London, many would find it impossible to move or commute. UCU met with OU management on 15th May to discuss the executive body's decision and remains concerned about the future of the OU's regional structure.

UCU branch officer Lydia Richards said: "The Open University is respected the world over for the way it brings high-quality higher education to a wide range of people. Part of that success is the efforts of staff in regional centres to harness the IT revolution, but still provide essential face-to-face support. People seeking a second chance at learning or trying to brush up on vital skills to meet the demand of the new economy need the OU - and they need the support its brilliant regional staff provide."

For further information and interviews contact: the UCU Office at The Open University, 01908 653069 or ucu@open.ac.uk.

REFERENCES

BBC News Story, 9 April 2014: 'Online Students Can't Help Being Sociable' (on MOOC providers recognising the importance of face-to-face interactions and learning) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-26925463>

Open University Region 13 (East Grinstead) local petition: <http://chn.ge/1hnUo7F>

Open University branch of UCU petition on East Grinstead closure: <http://chn.ge/1q6A8yB>



Paula James on BBC Radio Sussex and Surrey

Paula James, Staff Tutor and the UCU regional rep at East Grinstead was interviewed by Sarah Gorrell on BBC Radio Sussex live on their Drive-time show and also on BBC Radio Sussex, along with Wendy Maples and Ian Donnachie. The interviews highlighted some of the key reasons for keeping East Grinstead open and both interviews can be accessed on our new Campaigns page on the branch website. <http://ucu.open.ac.uk/campaigns>.



UCU Health & Safety news

The latest edition (May 2014) of the UCU Health & Safety news is at this address: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/hsnews>.



OU UCU Senate lobby — 11 June 2014

We held another lobby outside Senate on Wednesday 11th June. It was well attended, at one point over 30 people were milling about, holding placards and the UCU banner, giving out leaflets and talking to passers-by (and we also have our supporters in Senate). The photograph below was taken at the very end of the lobby, when many had gone back to work - and another group was still leafleting the side entrance. We received an overwhelmingly supportive reception from the hundreds of people we leafleted and spoke to outside the meeting. It's difficult to judge these things, but many appear to see the proposed closure of the Region 13 offices as yet another ill-conceived decision by the OU's senior management. Inside the Senate meeting the proposed closure of East Grinstead was raised once again from the floor. The OU senior management cannot justify the proposed closure in business or academic terms; they simply have no answers. The closure is now, quite bizarrely, being described as 'innovative') and Senior Management often look very uncomfortable but, unfortunately, they regard themselves as pretty much unaccountable to the wider OU community. So, they metaphorically shrug their shoulders and, presumably, hope that the issue will go away.

Well, the issue will not go away, the OU senior management have to understand that they cannot keep acting in such an irresponsible manner. We will not let them get away with disrupting (causing serious worry and hardship) the lives of many of the staff in East Grinstead and threatening hundreds of other people in the other Regional Offices in the process. There is another OU Council meeting on 15th July when we hope to persuade the Council members to look properly at the proposed closure, begin to ask the right questions and then be strong and ethical enough to halt the closure of East Grinstead. There's still time for some wiser counsel to prevail. The campaign to keep East Grinstead goes on – and will step up another gear.

John James, AL rep for Region 13



KEEP IT OPEN!
SAVE REGION 13

Lobby of OU Council meeting—13 May 2014

We are pleased to report that 18 UCU members attended our lobby of the OU Council meeting on 13th May 2014, see photo below.



Change.org petitions

Thank you to everyone who signed one or both of the Region 13 petitions, there was a local one followed shortly after by a branch one. Signatures were presented to the Chair of Council on 13th May. **The number of signatures on the 3rd July 2014 were as follows.**

Branch petition: 744 signatures <http://chn.ge/1q6A8yB>

Local R13 petition: 669 signatures <http://chn.ge/1hnUo7F>

Messages of support for East Grinstead

I wish to express my total support for the Regional Centre at East Grinstead.

Dr John Kirkaldy

Dear Pauline,

It does seem very worrying that it is Senate, not just ALs, that has been ignored.

How can a university work with the top two governing bodies in conflict? if this can happen over East Grinstead, what else is being ignored.

What do academic leaders (Deans and co) from faculties say. Are they not powerful voices in senate?

Peter Wainwright, UCU member & AL

I've been associated with the OU for 30 years both as a student and, for 22 years, an AL. Although I've been to MK from time to time, my Regional Centre has been the hub. I have direct contact with people there whose faces I know. People who know me and my work at least as well as I know them.

Without Regional Centres the OU boils down to a large, intricate, remote and relatively faceless MK. There's little personal about it. Just how remote is the OU prepared to become?

How far away are we, whatever our role, from contact that comes down to pressing the right buttons in the right order, according to the dictates of a recording machine?

UCU member

Messages of support for East Grinstead—continued

Dear OU council members,

I am a Social Sciences - Psychology AL in R13, employed only since 2010. However, the OU is like family to me, my mother Ann Brechin (then) working in HSW (HSC) almost since its beginning. I sat in offices there as a young child, had help with my 'A' levels from one of the psychologists Fred Toates at Walton Hall, and loved the library there through my studies, took an OU module to complement my degree. I worked briefly there to cover course co-ordination post for P555 and did some critical reading and writing there. I am always on the look out for increasing my work and involvement there, and have been very well supported with my professional development - easily the best employer I have had in 20 years of Health and Social Care. I am applying for a PhD and completing HEA Fellow. I volunteer lots of hours. Its values and its value are in my veins.

So it is with passion, commitment and love, that I ask you to hear my voice alongside so many others in considering the closure of Region 13 in your meeting tomorrow morning.

The local partnerships, skill and experience of Region 13 are irreplaceable. I have never come across such smooth running, and have worked in good teams across sectors. As an example our Regional Faculty Assistant has held together for our students and us as ALs the following changes (and these are just the ones I know about - we are well protected):

- Move to Student Support Teams (for us in Cambridge)
- Major re-structuring of the psychology curriculum
- Restructuring (at significant expense) the office space in the region, last year
- And now this complete shock to the whole team of the suddenly and unexpectedly announced closure (they were assured all well going forward at end of last year).

Our Faculty Assistant is like an anchor to us as ALs, alongside the staff tutors there, as is the regional base - we need to be able to check in and meet there - it is our base too, our place for meeting, training, developing, accessing resources - we need this to continue to deliver for our students.

And this is just one region, the proposed review of all regions feels so concerning. There is much good scope for online development, again very well supported by our region, but person to person contact is not dispensable, it is needed to anchor and enrich online resources. I know this from combining face to face with forum and online resources - the combination works. We cannot offer accessible services without this flexibility and mix, and we cannot maximise accessibility locally without local partnerships. We need local relationships. For example, my partner is consultant psychology lead for recovery services across Sussex Partnership NHS (a large trust). She was second generation in terms of access to university education and went from state school to Cambridge University onto Clinical Training - she is very aware of how many clinical psychologist have public school backgrounds, and is committed to redressing this balance for the benefit of service-users. Through the local presence of the OU, and a myriad of local connections it has fostered, she has been able to organise placements for OU psychology students. We simply must not lose this core value of the OU, we are much more than just a business, but these unique qualities are also of good business value - and I believe there is good work done on the cost benefit analysis of the closure.

So please do not ratify these decisions, and do insist on a full review. And do ensure that a real consultation takes place where the vast experience of all those on the ground, and especially of our students and local partners is properly recorded and analysed.

From a passionately committed AL and from the small child looking at awe and wonder at all that the OU set out to do.

Your sincerely,
UCU Member

I have been on leave and just accessed this email but I completely and unreservedly support the actions proposed in the bullet points of your email.

Slowly, the 'Open' in the OU is being eroded and now with closure of R13, the danger of becoming further removed from its supposed core values, just to brush shoulders with other elitist learning organisations 'pours water' over the years of dedicated hard work of **regional** staff, who play a pivotal role in the achievements of the OU.

It's nothing short of a 'slap in the face' for years of regional commitment to ensure student success, if Council do not reconsider their action and agree to a transparent analysis. Besides, who is the '**real face**' of the OU - local regions!

Sorry I cannot be there today but hope this email can be counted in some way.

Best Wishes

OU UCU member

Bank Holidays/Closure days issues for Part-time internal staff

UCU has received reports from members that the Resourcelink system seems very cumbersome to use, particularly so if you work part-time, with the result that members are now spending more time on administering leave. Part time members are now required to book off bank holiday and closure (BH/C) days that would normally fall within their working hours, which was unnecessary with the previous system.

The BH/C leave allowance came about through a policy decision that all part time staff should get a pro-rata entitlement to BH/C days. This was taken in 2007, but with a 5 year 'opt out' for existing staff which ended just before the 2012/2013 leave year. Before that, staff whose normal working hours didn't include a BH/C day didn't get any compensation for the 'lost' paid time off. Those who didn't work on Mondays were therefore missing out on 4+ BH/C Mondays a year, whilst those who didn't work on Wednesdays only missed out on the odd Christmas closure day, and could end up with more BH/C paid time off (pro-rata) than full time staff. With the new process it doesn't matter what their working days and hours are, everyone gets a standard allocation.

The BH/C allocation is calculated as the full time equivalent percentage x number of bank holiday and closure days in the leave year. E.g. for staff who work 80%, the BH/C allowance would be 80/100 x 11 days for the 2013/2014 leave year. In Resourcelink, this is added to the standard leave allowance to give one overall figure for leave entitlement, which can be checked by going to Absence Management > Absence Summary > Time Management – Employee View button at top of page > View Entitlement Details button at the bottom of page.

The situation is complicated for part-time staff who start their contract part-way through the year, because of the uneven distribution of BH/C days. If you feel that the allowance you have been given is incorrect and you are not able to progress your case with HR, please contact UCU for advice. ucu@open.ac.uk

The BH/C allowance doesn't always cover the BH/C leave requirement for the year, and sometimes exceeds it, depending on which days the member of staff normally works and on which days the BH/C days fall. The only way of monitoring the balance is by recording it, so booking the actual BH/C hours taken allows people to keep any excess allowance for use as 'normal' leave, and where there is a deficit staff must take one of the following options (with the agreement of their line manager):

- using bank-holiday / closure leave to cover the full day, staff need to book leave for the full number of hours they would normally have been worked on that day.
- if using a mixture of bank holiday / closure leave and making up any remaining hours, staff need to book leave for only the hours they are *not* making up. E.g. if they would normally work 7.4 hours, and they only intend to use 6 hours of leave for the closure day because they have worked an extra 1.4 hours on other occasions, they only need to book 6 hours of leave.
- if not using leave at all, because they have worked the extra hours to make up the time, there is no need for them to book leave at all.
- if using unpaid leave, the arrangement should be recorded outside ResourceLink using existing procedures.

For full time staff the process is more simple because they are entitled to all BH / C days, so there is no need to record them. The extra administration for part-time staff should, however, be undertaken in work hours: staff should not be expected to use their own time to fulfil this administrative overhead.



Health and Safety rep wanted

We are looking for another member to stand as a Health & Safety rep—there is a training course you can attend run by UCU. You would need to be able to attend some of the OU Health & Safety committee meetings. We do currently have 3 Health and Safety reps but it would be good to have more.

Information on the UCU Health & Safety reps course at this address:
www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=4918



New branch blog and twitter followers

The **Spark editorial group** decided that we should have a blog website for *the Spark* – it would make it easier to search for articles and allow members to post comments. This has now been set up at the following address—please post comments on there and we will gradually add a selection of the best articles that have appeared in the newsletter. We are looking for members to moderate and create content for the blog, please email ucu@open.ac.uk if you could take on this role.

<http://oubucu.wordpress.com>

The UCU branch at Leeds university have a very well established blog at this address: <http://leedsucu.wordpress.com>.



The branch is now “tweeting” a bit of news once a week and we are now up to 143 followers — <https://twitter.com/oubucu>. Leeds University branch of UCU has 1909 followers and yet the OU branch of UCU is the second largest UCU branch, we’ve got a way to go to catch up with Leeds!

New OUBUCU blog — RSS feeds

The OU branch of UCU now has a new WordPress blog which will be updated frequently to provide information and articles which are part of our regular *the Spark* newsletter. <http://oubucu.wordpress.com>

News and other articles from the branch will be posted to the blog as and when we have content to pass on. The articles will be consolidated into the regular *the Spark* PDF from time to time. The blog can be viewed on desktop and mobile devices.

Tracking articles and comments via RSS

The new blog gives us an immediate bonus for timely *the Spark* communication with members. The WordPress blog has an RSS feed associated with it both for new postings and your comments. This means that you can pick up new *the Spark* articles almost as soon as they are published and without waiting for the PDF version to be compiled or even having to open the blog on the web to see what’s new. The format also allows you to add your own comments and thoughts to each article as it becomes available and track what other people are saying.

If you already subscribe to RSS feeds this won’t be new, but if the RSS concept is unfamiliar to you there are several very easy ways to pick up new postings and comments as soon as they appear on the blog without having to locate it on the web.

One way is to use MS Outlook mail’s RSS feature to collect new posts and comments. (These are collected in a separate folder in the Outlook email tree and won’t intrude in your inbox.)

There’s a very simple ‘how to’ explanation video at this address: <http://youtu.be/no3nk4nsDdg>.

If you are using Outlook 2010, you’ll also and alternatively find the settings you need to add the RSS feeds under the File menu in the section Account Settings.

OUBUCU Blog new postings URL: <http://oubucu.wordpress.com/feed/>

OUBUCU Blog Reader’s Comments URL: <http://oubucu.wordpress.com/comments/feed/>

Notification of new items will be added automatically to your Mail folder tree in Outlook 2010 as soon as we post them.

Alternative methods of RSS notification

There are some alternatives. You can if you wish have new items notified to you automatically in an **email** using the ‘Blogtrottr’ service. All you have to do is visit this website: <http://blogtrottr.com/>. Once there, add the Blog Posting URL and your email address in the boxes provided and you’ll be notified each time a new item is added. If you want to receive notification about any comments, repeat the registration, this time using the ‘Comments’ URL. You will be invited to respond to an email confirming that you want to receive the notifications.

RSS Aggregator Clients

People who already use RSS feeds to keep up to date with postings and news in their academic fields may already be using other RSS collectors such as ‘**The Old Reader**’ (<https://theoldreader.com/>), **Feedly** (<http://feedly.com/index.html#discover>), ‘**Feed Demon**’ (<http://www.feeddemon.com/>) or others. It doesn’t matter which technique you use. The key thing is that the new feature allows you to keep track of new items and comments as and when they happen without having to open the website at all until you are notified that there is something to look at. Please contact the UCU office if you have any questions or post comments directly to the new blog.

David Clover, UCU retired member <http://about.me/david.clover>

Pay dispute results, May 2014

UCU members took industrial action and action short of a strike in response to the employers' failure to make HE members a proper pay offer for 2013-4. This included one day and two-hour strikes, and working to contract. The 2013-14 dispute ended when a conditional offer for 2014-15 was accepted.

Heartfelt thanks to members at the OU who took industrial action which forced the employers to offer 2% from August 2014 in addition to the 1% imposed 2013-14.

The result of the higher education pay ballot is as follows:

A total of 30,141 valid votes were counted, giving a turnout of 52.6%. The eligible votes were cast as follows –

To accept the offer and call off the marking boycott:
25,239 (83.7%)

To reject the offer and commence the marking boycott at the earliest opportunity possible:
4,902 (16.3%)

UCU offers retired membership

Are you retiring soon? Did you know that you could retain many of the benefits of full UCU membership by becoming a retired member:

- You can keep in touch with national and local UCU by continuing to receive the weekly campaigns emails as well as branch communications.
- retain the discounts on benefits and services negotiated for UCU members.
- maintain contact with UCU's experienced advice on superannuation matters
- You can continue in membership of your present branch/local association or join the UCU central group.



Retired membership is open to any member of UCU *retiring* at the minimum age limit and to any member who shall have so retired at an earlier age under the Premature Retirement Scheme, or on account of permanent disablement under ill-health provisions.

In order to retain full membership entitlements, particularly in connection with their employment, members of staff who are taking early retirement but continuing in part-time university or college employment are advised to continue in full membership (at a reduced subscription rate, if appropriate). Contact the Branch office to request an application form or it can be found on the Rules and Forms page of our branch website: <http://ucu.open.ac.uk/rules>.

UCU subs while on maternity leave

If you are going on maternity leave, please contact the branch office. UCU subs are the same as the normal F0-F6 rates. If a member's normal pay is £39,000, they pay the F2 rate (£30,000-£39,999) while on full pay and then reduce down to the F4 rate while on half pay. If they are on Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) or unpaid maternity leave then their membership is free of charge for that period.

Contact 01908 6(53069) or ucu@open.ac.uk.

UCU's Learning for life programme

A reminder that UCU now offers a free continuing professional development (CPD) programme with an extensive range of courses and downloadable guides providing practical help at work, and many branches are finding this a great way to promote UCU, to staff who've not yet joined: <http://cpd.web.ucu.org.uk/>.



Does UCU know where you work?

We would like to ask all members to check that the UCU membership database has your correct workplace. Please login to the members' eServices area and check that your workplace address is correct. You do need your UCU membership number to login, please contact the branch office if you do not know your number: 01908 6(53069) or ucu@open.ac.uk. While logged in you can see all the other information that UCU holds on you and you can check that it has your current email address.

UCU membership database: <https://members.ucu.org.uk/>

LOG IN
to member services
to update your record

UCU Members: Update your Details Online!

Did you know that you can update your membership details online?

You can change:

- contact details
- employment details
- update your subscription
- transfer to direct debit from other payment methods
- change from Student to Full membership or Full to Retired membership
- notify us of maternity leave or tell us if you are unemployed

To register – click on the Log In link on our website www.ucu.org.uk. You will need the email we hold for you and your membership number. If you have changed email details, or have forgotten your membership number, please email membership@ucu.org.uk

Once registered you will be able to log on to your record at any time via our website at www.ucu.org.uk. Just click on the Log In link on any of our web pages

UCU launches Policy hub

UCU has launched a new policy hub, containing new policy and discussion papers on vocational education, teaching professionalism, the Youth Resolution, privatisation, MOOCs and much more besides. Check out these papers and comment online here: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/policyhub>

Casualisation - an issue for all members

The use of casualised contracts in Further and Higher Education is increasing, because it is an all-too-common management response to funding cuts and marketization. If we do not manage to turn the tide of increasing casualisation, it will be used, as it is being used, to increase the rate of exploitation, and to unload all risks and uncertainties directly onto the workforce, while management avoids responsibility for workforce management and forward planning of workload.



In some institutions a majority of staff are vulnerably employed. This in itself means it is essential for the future of the union that we reach out and recruit more members from amongst them, both in HE and FE. UCU has done some excellent work in the last year few years, but is only beginning to get to grips with the scale of the problem.

Whose flexibility?

Sometimes one hears arguments from management that these contracts are flexible and suit some employees. I have to say this is an extremely rare point of view from an employee. On the contrary the phrase "no obligation to offer work, no obligation to accept work" does the opposite for the employee. The zero hours employee is usually afraid to refuse work in case they never get any more. This makes them an exploitable group, who can be offered difficult and underpaid work which they cannot afford to refuse. While flexible working should be on offer, for instance to enable staff to combine paid work with other activities, this flexibility can be accommodated via fractional contracts which give employees pro-rata employment rights.

PhD students and early careers staff

When PhD students are on the receiving end of casualisation, there is the additional pressure that they need references and teaching experience, and this need can be exploited even though real training and professional development is very thin on the ground. Many of our early careers staff face years, possibly a lifetime, of vulnerable employment. The impact on the individuals concerned was spelt out clearly by UCU members to the Scottish Affairs Parliamentary Select Committee, which is well worth listening to at <http://www.parliamentlive.tv/Main/Player.aspx?meetingId=15248>. They detail the difficulties in claiming state benefits when one's income is continually changing, and problems with getting a lease or a mortgage. In practice, all this makes starting out on an academic career impossible unless one's family or partner is willing and able to provide financial support.

Researchers

In HE, researchers' career trajectories are constantly interrupted by having to apply for work around the country, while others are on so-called open-ended contracts which still refer to continued external funding as a condition. The work done by researchers in writing and submitting bids is often unpaid and seen as something they do for free in order to keep themselves in employment. We must recruit more research staff to the UCU and campaign to turn the promises in the 2008 Research Concordat into reality, making research a viable career, not just a series of short-term contracts.

UCU Annual meeting for members on casualised contracts

This year's meeting took place in February 2014. Much of the discussion focussed on the report to the meeting of the outcome of UCU's Freedom of Information (FoI) requests to universities and colleges on the use of zero hours contracts. There is no clear definition of a zero hours contract, so the FoI request asked for the number of staff employed on contracts under which "the employer has no obligation to offer work and guarantees no minimum hours of work".

With a response rate of nearly 90%, the total number of staff identified by 75 HEIs as working on zero hours contracts is as follows: Teaching staff 21636; Research staff 915; Academic-related staff (pre-92s) 2174. There are already indications that the request was interpreted differently by institutions, and the figures given may well be an underestimate.

Other discussions included the participation of members on casualised contracts in the industrial action, w.r.t. the disproportionate effect of pay docking on some hourly paid staff, and concerns about victimisation, and the meeting passed motions asking for representation of members on casualised contracts at local branch committee level and on regional committees.

Other motions passed called for the gathering of information on the terms and conditions of graduate teaching assistants, "in the light of strong indications that HEI employers intend to expand the use of hourly paid postgraduate workers on the lowest possible pay scales at the expense of full time academic staff" and a motion asking for FoI requests to be used to collect information on the "terms and conditions of researchers in post-92 universities, in particular to discover any differences from those of other academic staff as regards holiday entitlement, pay and pension membership."

Our guest speaker was [Owen Jones, author of 'Chavs'](#), Independent columnist and socialist commentator, who spoke about the cuts in funding and higher fees in the context of Con-Dem economic policy and austerity. This was followed by discussion from the floor in which it was clearly felt that funding cuts were having a disproportionate impact on casualised staff, and also increasing the use of casualised contracts. In the afternoon there were three workshops on Casualisation and Equality, Building networks, Supporting negotiations against casualization.

Lesley Kane, Hon. Secretary

CDSA—a reminder

We wanted to remind our members that while CDSA forms should be completed, the Valued ways of working and Learning Competency Framework attachments are optional, and mainly for the purpose of self-appraisal. We would encourage staff to reach agreement through meaningful discussion with their appraiser about the most appropriate way of obtaining quality feedback from others on performance, and the best ways of utilising frameworks such as Valued Ways of Working and the Leadership Competency Framework. Where the appraiser and appraisee agree to use them, the VWW and LCF attachments should always be kept confidential and not part of an official record.

The agreement between the University and UCU on CDSA can be found at this address on the HR intranet, under CDSA principles: <http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/human-resources/policies-and-procedures/c#documents>. As stated, there has been no change to agreements reached in 2007 and 1987 and both documents are now on the OU branch of UCU website: <http://ucu.open.ac.uk/rules>.

Times Higher Education pay survey 2014

An extract of the article was sent to the UCU mailbox by a member.

A pay rise that certainly caught politicians' attention was the 10.9 per cent salary increase awarded to Martin Bean, vice-chancellor of The Open University, which took his overall pay and pension package to £407,000 – the third highest in the sector. Last month, MP George Galloway tabled an early day motion condemning "massive, above inflation pay rises of university vice-chancellors" and highlighting Bean's rising remuneration package. "The appeal from universities minister David Willetts to exercise restraint has fallen on deaf ears," the motion said.

Bean's pay rise came despite The Open University's student numbers falling 16 per cent in 2012-13 and its operational surplus halving to £18.8 million as part-time student levels were hit by the higher fee regime.

The Open University says that last year's rise was awarded to restore Bean's remuneration after he took a 10 per cent pay cut in 2010-11 as the institution adjusted to the new funding system.

The former Microsoft executive's pay "reflects the scale and complexity" of leading a "major international organisation and the UK's largest university with more than 200,000 students", a spokesman adds.

Read the full article at this address: <http://bit.ly/1pYEc1Z>

Stop cuts to funding for disabled and dyslexic students

A branch member sent the branch a link to a Direct.gov ePetition which you may like to sign at this address: <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/petitions/63748>.

David Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science, has announced the "modernisation" of the government grant for students with disabilities, the Disabled Students Allowances (DSA). The initial detail of this modernisation is a series of cuts in provision, placing the funding burden on Universities and individual students.

We the undersigned believe that these cuts will:

- Reduce access to higher education for students with disabilities and dyslexia; Reduce successful outcomes with less support meaning lower degree classifications for students who require additional support.
- Reduce the employment prospects for graduates with disabilities and dyslexia; increase the drop out/failure rate in universities amongst disabled and dyslexic students.
- Lead to further inequality within society.

We therefore call on the government to withdraw this policy statement made by the minister, David Willetts.

UCU subs increases

UCU has issued a circular showing the increase in national subs starting on 1st September 2014. At the branch AGM in November 2013, the Treasurer proposed a motion to increase our local subs, the motion was passed.

"As a branch we have been losing money for the last few years and while we have healthy reserves it is important that we reduce our losses. A working group has been set up to help reduce our expenses and this along with a modest increase in local subs should help to address the matter. We have not had an increase in local subs for 3 years.

Local subscriptions increase proposed for 2014-2015 Union year

Union subscriptions consist of two elements: national and local. For several years, we have had five monthly rates of local subscriptions: £3, £2, £1.50, £1 and zero. National subs have been increased every year in the last few years – the last increase in local subs was on 1st Sept 2010. UCU introduced a new top rate subs band from 1st September 2013 for members earning over £60,000 and we currently have 204 members paying at the new top level.

ANNUAL EARNINGS	New local Subscription (increase)	New national subs amount (Total new subs in brackets)
£60,000 & above	£4.50 (£1.50)	£23.38 (£27.88)
£40,000 - £59,999	£4 (£1.00)	£21.31 (£25.31)
£30,000 - £39,999	£3 (£1.00)	£19.37 (£22.37)
£20,000 - £29,999	£2 (50p)	£18.28 (£20.28)
£10,000 - £19,999	£1.50 (50p)	£11.14 (£12.64)
£5,000 - £9,999	0 (no change)	£5.05 (£5.05)
Below £5,000	0 (no change)	£2.67 (£2.67)

Formally, we should agree local subscriptions at an AGM, but this is difficult, since national subscription rates and salary bands are announced in July for implementation in September, and we have our AGM in November! I therefore propose the following:

We make an increase in local subs for the union year 2014-2015 which starts on 1st September 2014 and I would like permission to adopt the new local subs amounts, shown in the table.

By keeping the lowest subs band at a zero local sub means that we can still claim the low rate rebate from Head office each year. For the year 2011-12 we received £12,468 which was £15.04 per member on the lowest subs band and that year we had 829 members on that level. "

Which union? Bridlington agreement

The only guideline at the OU (about which Trade union to join) is that UCU has negotiating rights for the Academic, Academic-Related, AL and Research staff contracts whereas UNISON have rights to negotiate the Secretarial & Clerical staff contract. All OU staff grade 7 and above are eligible to join UCU* and for staff grades 1-6, you are eligible to join UNISON. (*Some academic-related trainees and research assistants are appointed to the top 3 points of grade 6 with the right to progress to grade 7. These staff are on academic-related or research conditions of employment and are also eligible to join UCU.)

In recent years the policy of some unions, most notably the EETPU, of seeking **single-union agreements**, led some other unions to argue that the Bridlington rules are being broken. This led to a revision of the rules in 1988 requiring prior notification of proposed single-union agreements to the TUC. In 1993 they were changed again as a consequence of new laws dramatically reducing union rights to exclude or expel individuals from membership. These changes have significantly reduced the effectiveness of the Bridlington Agreement.

www.eurofound.europa.eu/emire/UNITED%20KINGDOM/BRIDLINGTONAGREEMENT-EN.htm
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trade_unions_in_the_United_Kingdom#Bridlington_Agreement

Reps and Publicity contacts photo gallery

There are now 3 photo grids on the notice board outside the UCU office, they show Exec members, Walton Hall Departmental reps and Regional/national centre reps. We don't yet have photos of all reps, but hope to have them shortly. This grid shows the Walton Hall Departmental reps, the next issue of *the Spark* will show the regional/national centre reps. If your OU unit is not shown then we don't have a rep or Contact in that unit—please get in touch if you are interested in being a contact or rep.

<p>Arts Faculty Caitlin Adams (rep)</p> 	<p>Arts Faculty Paul-Francois Tremlett (contact)</p> 	<p>Audit, Social Sciences & Vice Chancellor's office Meridian (rep for 3 units)</p> 	<p>CICP Jonathan Hughes (rep)</p> 
<p>CICP Lesley McGrath (rep)</p> 	<p>Communications and Marketing & SRFS Jeni Aldridge (rep for 2 units)</p> 	<p>Faculty of Business and Law Chris Bollom (rep)</p> 	<p>Faculty of Science Geoff Bradshaw (rep)</p> 
<p>Faculty of Science Simon Sheridan (rep)</p> 	<p>FELS Daniel Allington (rep)</p> 	<p>Health & Social Care Wayne Taylor (rep)</p> 	<p>Information Office, KMI, Learning & Teaching, Office of PVC Academic, Research, Scholarship & Quality, Strategy Office and University Secretary's Office Tracey Bean-Williams (rep for 7 units)</p> 
<p>IET Gill Clough (rep)</p> 	<p>IT Kate Servant (rep)</p> 	<p>Library Services Sam Thomas (rep)</p> 	<p>LTS and Open Media Unit Dorothy Calderwood (rep)</p> 

Reps and Publicity contacts photo gallery continued

There are now 3 photo grids on the notice board outside the UCU office, they show Exec members, Walton Hall Departmental reps and Regional/national centre reps. We don't yet have photos of all reps, but hope to have them shortly. This grid shows the Walton Hall Departmental reps, the next issue of *the Spark* will show the regional/national centre reps.

LTS and Open Media Unit Neil Mitchell (rep)	MCT Faculty Ian Cameron (contact)	MCT Ben Mestel (contact)	Student Services Our rep has had to step down and we are looking for another member in Student Services to be the rep or UCU contact.
			

New UCU mugs and canvas bags

UCU have produced some new mugs and canvas bags, see photos below—the mugs cannot be posted as they don't ever arrive in one piece but if you are at Walton Hall then please call into room 015, Wilson C block and collect one. If you would like a canvas bag then please phone 01908 6(53069) or email ucu@open.ac.uk.



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 Editor

Several cases have come to light recently from different areas of the OU – both centrally and in the nations/regions – failing to apply the University's recruitment policies. It appears that some posts are not being advertised, but instead are being decided on by certain individuals in senior positions who are then approaching chosen colleagues to take on these posts.

Quite apart from not being in keeping with recruitment policy, this process goes against all equal opportunities policies. It is unfair and succeeds only in fostering low morale among the University's employees, most of whom work hard, often with little or no recognition or reward.

Would any senior managers reading this letter be prepared to respond and give staff an assurance that this practice will be stopped with immediate effect?

Yours,

UCU member, Walton Hall

Dear Editor

This letter is in response to Lesley Kane's email to everyone regarding pay negotiations with management. I must say that management seem to have absolutely no idea of how hard ALs work or of the extent of overwork necessary for many modules.

My own position is as follows: I was teaching 2 presentations a year of an Openings module until these were finally closed and the new Access modules brought in. I was lucky enough to get a contract for one of these, but the overall result has been a cut in salary of £1,829 even though we teach much of the same material (with a lot more added).

The cut seems to have been managed like this:

- because the contracts for Openings modules covered 5 months and Access modules cover 8, those of us who taught 2 modules per year now appear to be employed for 2 months less. However, since there are approximately 3 weeks at the end of a module that do not involve teaching, the split looks like this: 2 Openings modules: 8½ months teaching; 1 Access module: 8 months teaching. It's very close.
- We now mark 3 TMAs on an Access course whereas before we marked 2 per presentation – i.e. 4 per year. (Marking, however, is now much, much more detailed.)
- We are now deemed to work at Level 0 instead of Level 1 - even though, as I said above, much of the work is the same.

In addition, we are finding that the workload is heavier and also that much more is demanded of us in terms of both admin. and student support. I don't think that the level of input and responsibility for students on these initial courses is taken account of at all. Telephone tutorials are supposed to last 20 minutes. Well in reality, they're seldom less than half an hour, frequently 40 minutes, and in the worst case scenario, an hour. Students can have various mental and physical disabilities that can make short tutorials impossible. The result is that the time we spend with them far, far exceeds what we are paid for.

The point with Access is that we don't just give a phone tutorial occasionally. We have 17 students who all have to be taught individually on the phone. On a short Openings course, we gave, on average, 6 tutorials plus a first chat and a final check. On the new Access course, it can be up to 12 plus the hello and goodbye. And that's not counting all the extra 15 minute phone sessions on specific queries etc.

One experienced AL I spoke to says that she's been working a full week every week for this module. Now we know this is the first year we've taught it and that the amount of time we spend should reduce a bit, but it certainly won't reduce to anywhere near the point where we actually get paid for what we do. The university is running on the goodwill of its staff. But ALs can't afford it.

OU UCU Member



Your Executive Committee 2013-14

The Open University branch of UCU

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The Open University,
Walton Hall,
Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
Phone: (01908) 6(53069)
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Web: www.ucu.open.ac.uk
Twitter: @oubucu

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

Central Academic-Related Staff Officer: Kate Servant

Regional/National Academic Staff Officer: Philip O'Sullivan

Regional/National Academic-Related Staff Officer: Liz White, co-opted May 2014

Associate Lecturers Officer: Judy Ekins

Ordinary Members:

Jeni Aldridge	David Houpt
John Bennett	Hilary Partridge
Chris Bollom	John Peters
Eric Bowers	Peter Piper
Gill Clough	Nicolas van Labeke
Bruce Heil	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

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.

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
- Pens
- Mouse mat
- Publicity posters



Branch meetings 2014

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

Tuesday 23rd September 2014 branch meeting at 12.30pm, Room B232
Wednesday 19th November 2014 AGM at 12.30pm, Room B232