

The Open University branch of UCU

The Spark — November 2011

Defend your USS pension

UCU has always acknowledged that some changes to USS were needed to cope with emerging cost pressures – particularly the fact that all of us are living longer and drawing pensions for longer. Indeed, your Union proposed sensible reforms based on actuarial advice. Regrettably, our employers refused to negotiate a reasonable package. Instead, they insisted on imposing draconian changes with effect from October 1st this year.

USS is not a public sector pension scheme reliant on the taxpayer. Our pensions are backed by a massive pension fund, currently valued in excess of £32billion! The employers claim that the scheme is in difficulty. However, on the basis of any reasonable set of assumptions, USS is fully funded to meet its liabilities. UCU has accepted the increased contribution rates which are necessary to meet the costs arising from improving life expectancy. The changes which the employers have imposed go far beyond what is required to secure the financial stability of USS for the foreseeable future. In some respects, the imposed changes are worse than anything suggested for the public sector schemes.

The financial impact of these changes for individual members will depend upon their age and career path. Everyone will lose but the worst cuts in benefits (of around 30% compared to previous expectations) will be felt by new entrants to the profession. Existing members enjoy some protection but this represents little more than a stay of execution. Experience elsewhere indicates that the protection of final salary benefits for existing staff survives for little more than a few years after the creation of “two tier” pension arrangements, such as we now have in USS. The employers have always been clear that it is their wish to close the final salary tier and force everyone into the massively inferior “career average” tier for future service.

It is obvious that all UK universities, including the OU, face serious financial difficulties in the immediate future. But the imposed pension changes are not a rational response to this. It will be many years before the changes produce significant savings. In consequence, there is no immediate or medium term prospect of reduced employer contribution rates. On the contrary, the employers are facing the prospect of a prolonged, seriously disruptive and costly industrial dispute.

In a national consultative poll of USS members, 96% of the voters rejected the employers’ plans. In response to this, some marginal changes were conceded but the employers continued to refuse to negotiate. This left UCU with no option but to hold a further national ballot on industrial action in which 68% voted for strike action and 77% voted for action short of a strike. The dispute continues and the anger of members is growing. **UCU is currently asking members to “Work to Contract” and, unless a settlement is reached, action will escalate to an assessment and examination boycott backed up by strike action when appropriate.**

The one positive straw in the wind is that there are now – at long last – some indications that UCU pressure is beginning to pay off and that wiser counsels may be emerging on the employers’ side of the bargaining table. The national USS Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) has agreed to establish a working party to explore, without prejudice, options for further changes.

USS

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The two sides will meet in November and report to a specially convened JNC in mid December. We have achieved our first objective – to secure renewed dialogue.

There is, of course, no guarantee that this will lead to a positive or acceptable outcome. UCU will be approaching these talks in a spirit of constructive engagement. We will know by December 2011 whether or not this spirit is reciprocated. In the meantime, there must be no slackening in the action and we must remain determined, if necessary, to escalate to more serious action if necessary. It is thanks to your continuing support that we have got back to the table. We need your continuing support in order to achieve a result.

Alan Carr, UCU National Treasurer, UCU USS Negotiator and OU UCU Executive Committee member

No contests in Branch elections & AGM

When nominations closed for members of the OU branch executive, there were no contested elections.

A number of current senior officers of the branch, including President Roger Walters, Hon Secretary Lesley Kane, Treasurer David Knowles and Vice Presidents Pauline Collins and Bethan Norfor, were re-elected unopposed. There were a number of vacancies including for ALs Officer and Central Academic Staff Officer. In some cases outgoing executive members who had intended to seek re-election did not submit nominations in time or at all.

The first meeting of the new executive in mid December will decide how to fill the vacant posts.

The new executive takes up office at the end of the Annual General Meeting of the branch on Tuesday 22 November 2011 at 12.30pm in the Berrill Lecture theatre—all members are welcome to attend and the meeting will be web-cast via the stadium website: <http://stadium.open.ac.uk/stadia/preview.php?whichevent=1787&s=1>

OU to make major changes in Continental Europe

It was recently reported to Senate that the OU has decided in principle to de-commit from face to face tuition using ALs based in continental Europe and will instead concentrate on "substantial online delivery." This is part of a new International Strategy which is being developed.

At the time of writing no information is available about the full impact of this decision and particularly about proposed timescales, but UCU will be fully consulted about this as plans develop. Different employment legal frameworks in different countries will make this a complex issue.

There are no implications for the OU's activity in the Republic of Ireland. There are currently just under 100 ALs based in Continental Europe and a handful of internal staff.



OUSA calls for talks to resolve pension dispute

OU Students Association President Marianne Cantieri has written to the Vice Chancellor to urge him to "continue to play a vigorous role in trying to get the Employers' representatives to commit themselves to meaningful negotiations" to resolve the USS dispute. She writes that "OUSA is very well aware of the commitment and dedication of OU staff and we know that they would not take lightly action to undermine the quality of the service provided to our students. However we understand that neither will their union stand by and see the pension scheme of their members undermined without fighting to protect it."



OU Students
Association

Widespread concerns about Lync

The UCU branch has taken up with the University widespread concerns among staff at Walton Hall about the introduction of a new system called Microsoft Lync, which links telephones to PCs. The main feature of this system is that you need to log onto your PC before you can make or receive phone calls and this is a problem for those staff who do not necessarily log on - and remain logged on - all the time they are in their office.



The branch has objected to this major change in new technology being introduced without any discussion at all with the union, although the procedure agreement between the OU and OU UCU lists the introduction of new technology as an item on which there should be discussions with a view to reaching an agreement.

The union has also raised concerns about the apparent lack of effective piloting of the new system before it was widely introduced and in particular about emergency situations - e.g. when someone is taken ill and needs to summon help quickly but is delayed from so doing by the need to log on.

The initial response from Management shows no recognition that this major change should have been negotiated with UCU, that it was not adequately piloted and most important that there are very serious and worrying safety issues. The union will be pressing on these points at the next Joint Negotiating Committee meeting shortly.

CDSA and rewards

OU management has confirmed that the provision in the 2007 CDSA agreement between the OU and OU UCU for a mechanism, whereby any information about CDSA supplied as part of a promotion case, should be based on a summary of the CDSA report agreed by the appraiser and appraisee - or separate reports if no such agreement was possible, should apply to special awards as well as promotions. This follows a protest from UCU that a recent circular to heads of units inviting submissions for special awards had referred to using information from CDSA without making clear that this had to be based on an agreed summary. To have used information without agreeing this with the appraisee would have breached other provisions of the CDSA agreement relating to confidentiality.



Management has undertaken to provide further clarification to heads of units on this matter.

Changes likely in Business Development Unit

Further changes in the organisation of the Business Development Unit (BDU) seem likely following the bringing together in one office of staff, some of who are OU employees but some of who are employed by OU Worldwide. OUW - a company wholly owned by the OU but which uses quite different terms and conditions of service and salary scales.

UCU does not have negotiating rights for OUW staff but has submitted a renewed request for such rights in the light of these likely changes and has pressed for consultation about any future changes.

The UCU branch will consult members in BDU, whether employed by the OU or OUW, before any discussions on this matter take place.

Policy on study leave

UCU has asked for discussions with the University about measures in a number of faculties to change policy and practice in relation to study leave, especially in relation to the amount of study leave which has been carried over. A number of members have raised concerns about a hardening of the approach to study leave carry over on a use it or lose it approach, notwithstanding provisions for carry over in terms and conditions of service.

Any members with concerns on this matter should email ucu@open.ac.uk.

Attempts to change leave policy in IT

Staff in IT were angry to be told in October that there were to be significant changes in leave policy which were being unilaterally imposed on them including:

- a requirement that 5 days of the 10 days they are entitled to carry over to the next leave year to be taken by 31 December;
- a requirement that for those - including all academic related staff - with 33 days annual leave entitlement, 13 days should be taken in the period from October to March and 20 days in the period from April to October;
- a maximum of 12 days leave to be taken at any one time.

One member of IT senior management told staff that the new policy was intended to provide a better work life balance. But in expressing fundamental objection to such unilateral attempts to vary terms and conditions of service, UCU pointed out that whilst all leave arrangements had to be agreed by managers and there might sometimes be operational reasons for not allowing requests for leave, it was a matter for staff to determine their work life balance in the light of their particular personal circumstances, and that the changes would be particularly detrimental to staff with caring responsibilities for school age children as it would require them to take a significant part of their leave in term time.

Following discussions IT agreed to clarify their policy and to ensure compliance with negotiated terms and conditions of service.



Strike on 30 November 2011

There may be a one day strike on November 30th in relation to the ongoing dispute on public sector pensions. This is of direct relevance to UCU members in post 92 universities and in FE Colleges who are members of the public sector Teachers Pension Scheme.

Members in pre 92 institutions, including the OU, are members of USS which is a fully funded private pension scheme, not controlled or funded by government. Negotiating structures for USS are separate from those for the public sector schemes. However, the imposition of damaging and detrimental changes to the public schemes would clearly influence the environment in which USS negotiations take place.

UCU will, therefore, be calling on members in pre 92 universities to take action on November 30th if members in the public sector schemes decide to strike on that day -unless, of course, we have reached a satisfactory resolution to the USS dispute by that time. This will demonstrate our determination to play our full part in defending decent pensions for all. It will also send a clear signal to our employers that we will not accept the detrimental changes to USS which will make our pensions inferior to those available to colleagues in the public sector schemes. This will reinforce the position of your representatives in the USS negotiations which are due to recommence shortly.

Alan Carr, UCU National Treasurer, UCU USS Negotiator and OU UCU Executive Committee member

National UCU Elections

Nominations have been invited for a number of national positions in UCU, chief among them being for General Secretary. UCU is required to elect its General Secretary every five years by Tory anti union legislation which, the Tories hoped, would reduce the power of "trade union barons."

Current incumbent, Sally Hunt, who was previously General Secretary of the AUT before the merger with NATFHE, which led to the formation of UCU, has announced she is seeking re-election. One already declared candidate challenging her is Mark Campbell, a member of the National Executive Committee from London Metropolitan University, who is a leading light in the group which styles itself UCU Left and is heavily influenced by the Socialists Workers Party.

Other elections which OU branch members will be entitled to vote in include for a Vice President - who will in the future become President - to be drawn from the Further Education sector, for seven UK elected members from the higher education sector, for three women members, for two representatives of casually employed members and for three Trustees. OU branch Vice President Pauline Collins is seeking re-election as one of the women members.

Nominations close on 23 November 2011 and where there are contested elections, ballots will be held in February 2012.

A reminder about CDSA

Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA) of staff is undertaken within the principles of the national agreement with the University and College Union. It is a joint agreement between the OU and UCU.

Members have asked us to remind them of the main points: -

- CDSAs are confidential and may contain sensitive information. For that reason they are shared with the appraisee, the appraiser and the unit head only and in hard copy.
- If an appraisee wants to share their CDSA with other staff, that is their choice.
- If information from your CDSA is used for consideration for promotion or rewards, an agreed summary of your CDSA report should be used.
- You do not have to have had a CDSA to be considered for a merit award.
- Appraisees have the right to request a different appraiser.
- The CDSA should only be signed by the appraisee when there is mutual agreement about the content.



You should note that Valued Ways of Working is not part of the CDSA process agreed with UCU. For the full agreed procedures on CDSA go to the HR intranet at this address: <http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/human-resources/policies-and-procedures/c#>

Flexible working—from Policy to Practice

Employees with children or who are carers of adults have a legal right to request to work flexibly, providing they meet certain criteria (see Guidance on Statutory Flexible Working Rights on the HR intranet at this address: <http://bit.ly/ucXjOM>). It is recognised that employees with other commitments or interests may also wish to request different working arrangements, and these may continue to be considered within Units without having to follow any formal procedure.

The OU Flexible working policy states the principle to be that "The University will give due consideration to any request for flexible working arrangements, where operationally feasible."

Is this your experience? If not, we would like to hear from you. Contact ucu@open.ac.uk, or phone 01908 6(53069) or call into Room 015, Wilson C block.

STOP the cuts in the Open University

The UCU branch has launched a petition expressing concern about UK government cuts in higher education in general and in the OU in particular, which have led to a massive planned increase in OU fees in England which, we fear, will in turn lead to a big reduction in students and thereby threaten jobs and which will threaten the fundamental mission of the OU to be open to all. The petition also calls on the OU to bring pressure to bear on the UK government to change its policy by campaigning publicly in conjunction with OU trade unions and the Open University Students Association.

Members are encouraged to sign this petition by going to www.ipetitions.com/petition/oubucu and to encourage others, both in the OU and elsewhere, to do so. Those signing the petition should note that the website used for this invites you to make a donation to the organisation which runs the website, but we are not asking you to do this and it is entirely possible - and relatively easy - to sign the petition without making a donation, simply close your web browser or click to go to another website or your home page. You will see text that says "Your signature has been recorded" at the top of the donations screen. Anyone who has any difficulty about this should e mail ucu@open.ac.uk or phone 01908 653069.



Re-organisation—how might this affect your job grade?

Many areas of the OU are undergoing major or minor re-organisation, often as a consequence of reductions in staffing levels, and so staff are sometimes asked to take on extra duties. In some cases this might make you eligible for consideration for re-grading.

If you have taken on extra responsibilities or duties and you feel this might merit a higher grade, the first thing to do is to consult the Job Evaluation Criteria which you can find at: <http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/human-resources/policies-and-procedures/j#documents>

Then you can compare your new duties with the criteria to see if this might make you eligible for a higher grade and if so, ask for your line manager for your post to be re-evaluated. If your line manager or head of unit is unwilling to do this, then please inform the branch by e mailing ucu@open.ac.uk or phoning Deb Shann on extension 53069.

Celebrate UK Disability History Month

The second ever Disability History Month takes place between 22 November and 22 December this year. This is an opportunity to celebrate the struggles and achievements of disabled people, to create a better understanding of the barriers in society which disabled people face and to help develop campaigning activity on what needs to be changed to enable disabled people to achieve equality in all areas of life.

As part of this celebration, the branch, in conjunction with the OU Equality and Diversity team and the OU Disabled Staff Network, are having a meeting on Monday 28 November at 12.30pm in the Berrill Lecture Theatre, where the main speaker will be Richard Rieser, a long time campaigner on disability issues who is the Co-ordinator of Disability History Month.

All are welcome, whether UCU members or not and whether disabled or not. This event will be webcast on the stadium website: <http://stadium.open.ac.uk/stadia/preview.php?whichevent=1788&s=1> and further information can be found at: <http://ukdisabilityhistorymonth.com>.



Branch member detained by Israeli authorities

Les Levidow, a Senior Research Fellow in Maths, Computing and Technology and a long time campaigner against Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, was one of a number of activists who was detained by Israeli authorities because they intended to visit the West Bank - and made no secret of their intention to do so. Les condemned the detention as illegal especially as the Israeli government claimed that they had never officially entered Israel and were still in transit though they were held in in Israeli detention centres some 20 miles from Ben Gurion airport.

The Israeli government has never given an official explanation for the detention.

Concession to retired staff

Under current USS rules, staff who retire must, in order to draw their USS pension, retire from all employments which might be linked to USS. This has caught out some staff who were both internal staff and ALs and who wanted to retire as internal staff whilst remaining ALs.

Following discussions with UCU, the University has agreed to treat such people as if they were still "current staff" if they apply for re-appointment as ALs within twelve months of their retirement date, and so they would be eligible to apply for posts which are otherwise normally limited to current staff only. They would not though be able to make renewed USS subscriptions once they have drawn a USS pension.

UCU is pressing the University to extend this concession to former ALs who were internal staff in other pre-92 universities and who have similarly been obliged to retire from their AL work.

Student Quotas and AL employment

In the summer concerns were expressed that the OU was intending to operate a quota system for registration of new students on October start courses, and that this might have an adverse effect on AL jobs. The university wished to limit the number of new students beginning their studies under the old fee system, as they would be able to continue to pay fees at the current level for a few years. Students in England joining the university from October 2012 will pay much higher fees, as they will at other English universities. In August we wrote to management expressing our concern. We were told that quotas had been set at 10% over target, that the university was expecting a bumper year prior to the fee increase next year, and that there was no cause for concern about AL jobs. At the beginning of September student registrations seemed to be living up to expectations and many courses were reported to be up to quota.



We were therefore very shocked a couple of weeks later to be told that registrations had closed with many entry level courses significantly below quota. We immediately asked management if this was correct and if so to take urgent measures to try to rectify the situation, including re-opening registration for a few days to allow more students to firm up their plans, as it seemed that there was no shortage of students wanting to sign up; indeed most modules had waiting lists. Over the next few days it became clear that many students had been turned away and that there would be a big loss of AL appointments, particularly on K101 and DD101. Management insisted that it was too late to do anything about it. At this point we emailed all AL members and asked them to write in to the Vice Chancellor and Director of Students complaining about the failure to keep registration open for longer, and explaining how the consequent loss of employment and income would affect them.

The Vice Chancellor replied to everyone who emailed him and a statement was posted on Tutorhome on 29th September 2011 at this address: <https://msds.open.ac.uk/tutorhome/messages.aspx>—Statement on student registrations for October. He said that **"Quotas are based on the OU's experience of previous intakes. This year, behaviour changed at the last minute and we saw a change in demand from students going through from reservation stage to registration stage. If registration patterns had followed previous years, our student figures would be as we had anticipated."** We now believe that the change in student behaviour was minimal, and that the problem was caused by telling students that modules were full when the total of reservations and registrations were up to quota. Modules are only full when registrations are up to quota. It has always been the case that many reservations do not follow through to become firm registrations. There may also have been a delay in processing applications for financial assistance; students who need financial support do not usually commit themselves without confirmation from the university that it will be forthcoming.

A month on, we now believe that the number of AL appointments lost is lower than we had feared; the figure we have been given is 42. This seems to be because the university has allocated smaller groups than usual, although they have not confirmed this and we can not be sure until the group size reports for October come out in a few weeks time. K101 and DD101, both courses which attract a higher than average proportion of students needing financial support, seem to be the worst hit. Thanks to your eloquent emails, we hope the VC now understands, as we do, that every loss of appointment is potentially disastrous for the affected ALs, who rely on the income.

We are now concentrating our efforts on ensuring that there is no repeat on the next big intake of new students in February 2012. We have asked for quotas to be removed, and if student numbers rise, for ALs who lost work in October to be offered groups on the same module in February. We have also asked for changes to the redundancy criteria so that ALs who lose an appointment are less likely to lose another within a short space of time. As things stand, it is possible for an AL who has a big commitment to the university and no other source of income to find their workload and income decimated in a few months, as they top the redundancy lists over and over.

We will continue to monitor the situation over the next few months and will keep members informed of new developments.

Sue Hawthorne, ALs Officer

The OU ignored the wishes of 1200+ members of staff and closed the bars at lunchtimes

For those of you who think the VC's oft-repeated statements about how he values the loyalty and commitment of staff actually mean what it says, alas these are just words.

The University may value the loyalty and commitment of staff but neither it, nor the VC, will lift one finger to show their appreciation. The vast majority of you won't get rewarded for those sterling efforts on behalf of the OU. Also, alas, the VC won't act to protect the facilities available to you.

The sudden announcement that the bar would close on the 1st August caused a massive protest on the part of staff. There are precious few facilities available on campus for central staff and visiting regional and AL staff, where they may find colleagues from other units. The bar is a social area where one may socialize with other staff over a drink. The bar is not an echoing barn like the Hub, where there is pressure on one to eat and go, but an area where one may relax. In addition, it offered short order food, freshly prepared, and superior in many respects to the fare at the Hub.

The reason given was to save money, but it turned out that the decision to close was made early in 2011, it was kept secret from staff and their representatives. There was no transparency or accountability. Indeed, even today we have not been given the true costs of running the bar. From the little information shared with us we know that the bars made a profit so closing them at lunchtimes does not save money, but actually loses money.

It was soon obvious that the desire to close the bar was on the part of a handful of senior staff whose prejudices are apparent and who certainly do not use the bar service themselves.

A petition gained over 1200 signatures. Sadly, a lunchtime meeting with the Directors of Estates and HR showed they were impervious to logic, and blissfully unconcerned about the many activities on campus which cost a lot and make no profit whatsoever. The lies they told about a 30% reduction in use were shameful and easily rebutted. Happily, the threat of a public demonstration on the day of the naming of the Jennie Lee Building got an extension of the closure date.

Consultations of a sort took place during August when most staff were absent on leave. Indeed, some units did not nominate representatives to attend consultation meetings. It was absolutely clear from the consultation and the petition that staff wanted the bars open at lunchtimes and evenings. Also, it was clear that the bars were used most at lunchtimes, and that this would subsidize the less well-used evening sessions.

Incredibly, despite the positive feedback the decision was taken to close the bar at lunchtimes, and to open only in the evening. This benefits the post graduate student community at the cost of serious losses to central staff, and visiting regional and AL staff 99% of who go home in the evenings.

The VC was written to by many protestors to protest about the idiocy of closing an operation which made a profit, but he simply referred the matter back to the Directors of Estates and HR. Those two senior staff replied to state that they closed the bars to save money! As this stance had been debunked by their evidence, it seems absurd to repeat such an obvious canard. Apart from proving that they neither paid attention to staff feedback or the logic of the situation, their repetition of this palpable untruth about saving money is so derisory as to make one wonder about their professional competence.

Incidentally, their prejudice against drinking at lunchtimes does not stop staff going off campus and putting profits into the coffers of local pub landlords.

This proves again that the VC and the OU does not value the loyalty and commitment of staff. Please write to the VC to protest at the lack of resources for central staff and those visiting the campus. As things stand at present, the majority of staff have been discriminated against, so we must protest in order to get these facilities open again at lunchtimes.

John Bennett, OU UCU Executive Committee member

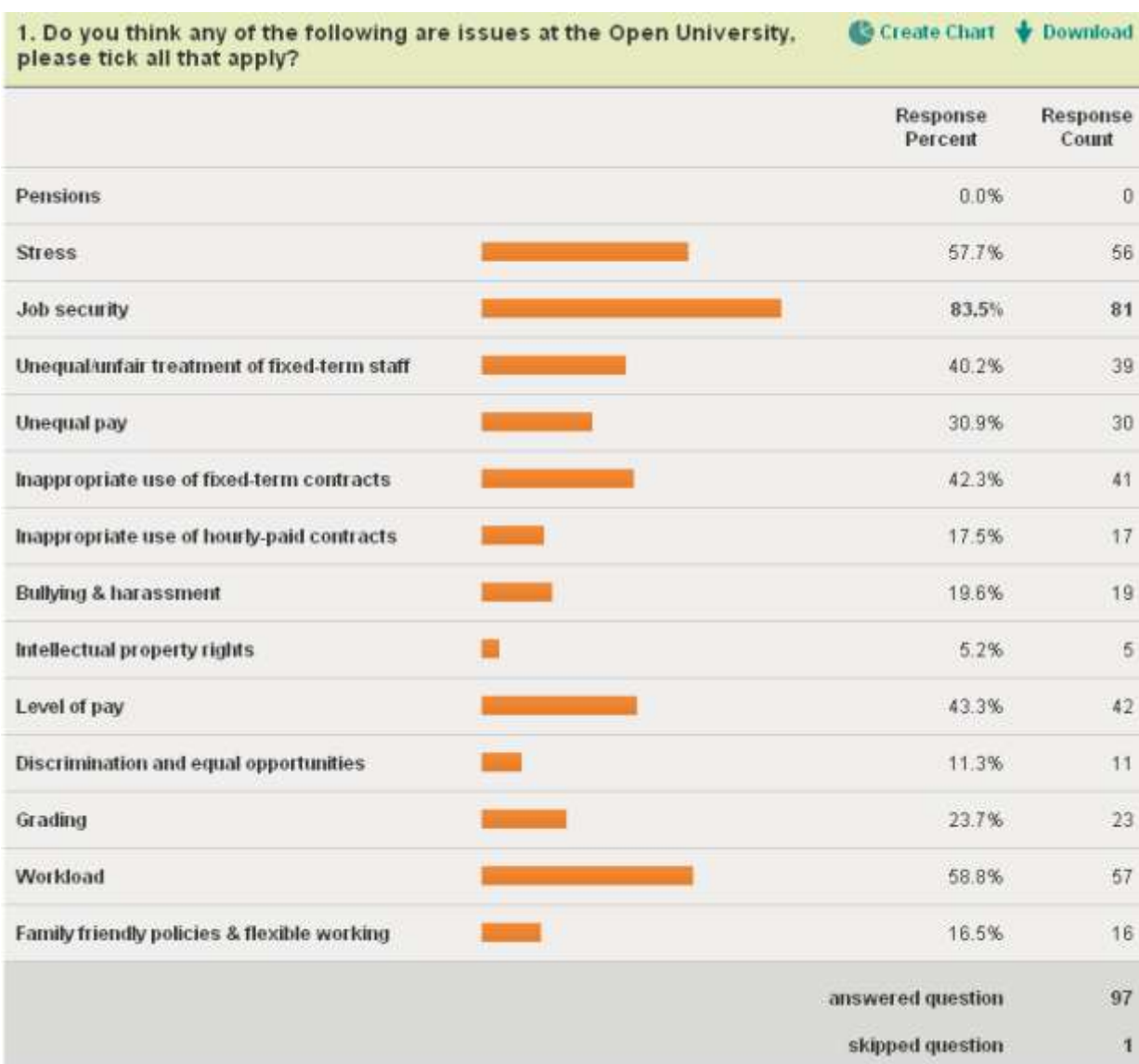


Defend USS



OU UCU Members' questionnaire

We launched an OU UCU members' questionnaire in the May 2011 issue of Spark—we are pleased to announce that so far there have been 98 responses from members. Thank you to all members who completed the questionnaire. It's not too late if you want to complete the questionnaire at: www.surveymonkey.com/s/OUBUCUissues. The Recruitment sub-group have used the results to produce a new flyer that will be printed shortly. We thought it might be of interest to show some of the results so far, and so the table below shows the major issues for members here at the Open University. NB: the pensions issue has only just been added and so it wasn't listed as an issue when the first 98 people completed the questionnaire.



Get connected

If you would like to join one of the national UCU Equality networks, please send an email to egadmin@ucu.org.uk stating your preferred email address along with the name of the network you would like to join. You should note that these networks are not discussion forums, but that you will be sent information relating to the area of equality. The networks available for joining are:

- Black Members Network
- Disabled Members Network
- LGBT Members Network
- Women Members Network

Jonathan Jewell, Equality Officer



New Equality reps

Our Branch Equality Officer, Jonathan Jewell has now recruited 2 Equality reps —thank you to Maria McCrea, Student Services, OU in Scotland and John Peters, AL for accepting this role. They will now be working with Jonathan on equality issues at the Open University.

Don't assume that we know

If you are approached about restructuring or changes in your department/unit, please don't assume that the OU branch of UCU have been told about the changes. Contact us to make sure that the correct procedures are being followed, phone Deb Shann on 01908 6(53069) or by email ucu@open.ac.uk.

Thank you to our retired members

Back in January 2011 we wrote to all our retired UCU members asking them to complete a questionnaire—the Recruitment sub-group have looked at the results of the questionnaire and will be using their feedback in the future. Out of 55 questionnaires sent out, 30 were returned, a 54% response rate—we would like to thank all the retired members who returned their questionnaire, we appreciate your feedback!

If you are due to retire shortly, please continue as a retired member of the union and the subscription is only £2.43 per month. The UCU Retired membership application form is now on the branch website, Rules and Forms page: <http://ucu.open.ac.uk/rules>, or contact the Branch Administrator Deb Shann on 01908 6(53069) or by email ucu@open.ac.uk.

Work to contract resources

The branch office has stock of the bright pink "I'm working to contract" posters if any member wants to display one at their desk—please phone Deb on 01908 6(53069) or by email ucu@open.ac.uk or call into room 015 Wilson C block at Walton Hall. There are also "I'm working to contract" stickers available and a stock of the following poster has just been ordered!

There is a wealth of information on the Defend USS website at the following address: <http://defenduss.web.ucu.org.uk>



Interviewing and selection – a tale of two ALs

In the August issue of Spark we carried an article on the wastefulness in terms of staff time and resources of the AL interviewing and selection process. Since then we have come across several more cases that illustrate the unfairness, wastefulness and idiosyncratic nature of this process.

Case 1

A long standing AL applies for a third level course, and sends the application to two regions within travelling distance of his home town. In one region he is interviewed and appointed to tutor the course. The other region, on the basis of the same application, denied him an interview on the grounds that he has not demonstrated that he meets the basic AL person specification.

Case 2

Another long standing AL applied to her home region to tutor a course she currently tutors in another region, which she has tutored since its beginning, and on which she has contributed to monitoring and mentoring other ALs, and to EMA and TMA question setting. She had also previously tutored the course for her home region until she lost it due to falling student numbers a couple of years back when she was in the front line for losing the course due to holding a number of other appointments. She had to submit a completely new application, including demonstrating on paper (to whatever extent it is possible to demonstrate on paper) that she fulfilled the basic AL person spec. She was asked to attend in person for an interview and to present her academic qualifications for inspection, and only when she pointed out her length of service and concurrent employment on the same course in another region was it decided that she could be interviewed by phone and need not submit degree certificates.

Both these cases are, to put it mildly, ridiculous. In a more “normal” employment environment the second AL would have had a case for promotion, rather than being in the front line for losing the appointment a couple of years ago. This case also illustrates how many ALs are carrying out duties above and beyond the AL role, but the (legally questionable) use of consultancy contracts by the OU denies them pension contributions and other benefits for this part of their work.

On the first case, UCU holds that current ALs should be deemed to fulfill the generic AL person specification if they are successfully tutoring other OU courses without any issues of performance or capability.

If the AL in the first case had been potentially redundant, the OU could have been subject to an unfair dismissal claim on the grounds that the OU did not attempt to redeploy him and that the grounds for not redeploying him were spurious given that no previous issues had been raised over his competence to be an AL.

Lesley Kane, Hon. Secretary



AL telephone expenses?

Since many students only give mobile numbers these days, there is clearly an expense involved in running them to ground by **phone. There has been a lot of confusion about what AL expenses actually cover, but a closer look reveals that it isn't very much, and that ALs who repeatedly call mobile numbers are subsidizing the OU.**

The component of AL expenses for non-ICT costs (so photocopying, postage stamps, telephone calls, and any other non-ICT expense other than travelling) is still based on the old piece rate of 76p expenses per TMA script submitted, though an average is calculated these days based on a group of standard size and the assumed TMA submission rate for the course. This contributes to the “theoretical earnings” for a course which is then rounded (usually downwards) to the nearest AL point 1 (i.e. probationers) salary.

So on a course with a group norm of 15 students, four assignments and an assumed submission rate of 67%, that will be 67% of 40 times 76p which comes to £30.40, and that is supposed to cover other things as well as telephoning.

Depending on other requirements, these expenses allow for very few, if any, phone calls to mobile phones, and union advice to AL members is to regard email as the normal means of communication with students who do not give a landline number. If you are unable to contact a student you can refer them to the region/nation.

Welsh National Director writes to ALs

ALs in Wales were surprised in October to receive a letter from their National Director. Such communications are rare, and usually inform the recipient that they are about to be made redundant from a module as student numbers have fallen. This **letter was different, its purpose was to enthuse ALs to do more to improve student retention. ALs were invited to consider** “the very simple approach of a one-to-one welcome phone call to each student in your group. This has been shown to have a positive impact on retention – **the Review of the Learner Support Framework 2010 found that among new, “at risk” students, a pre-course phone call improved retention by 5% compared to students contacted by email, and I am keen that we should extend the benefits of such a call to all students”.**

ALs who have tried this will know that this apparently simple task is fraught with difficulties, and takes much longer than you might suppose. The first problem is when to do it. Most students work and perhaps would not welcome a phone call during the day, although it might be worth trying for those who have given the same number for both day and evening contact. Perhaps it would be better to leave it till the evening. Most households are busy during the evening, and the students reaction often shows that you have caught them when they were cooking, or putting the kids to bed, or had just settled down to watch the football. Worse, you may find out more about the students private life than you want to know. AL - “Can I speak to John please?” Hostile female voice - “He’s not here.” AL - “I am his OU tutor, can I leave a message?” Hostile female voice - “He doesn’t live here any more, and if you see him you can tell him....!”

Many students only give the university a mobile number these days, and this presents even more opportunities for catching them at a bad time, as well as another dilemma. It is expensive to phone a mobile from a landline. I have a mobile on a contract, so it is much cheaper to use that to phone other mobiles, but I do not usually tell my students the number – I have my own needs for a bit of peace and quiet. Thrift usually wins out over privacy for me; probably the student will not save my number, and I am aware that the small sum the OU allows for expenses does not run to many phone calls to mobiles. What with leaving messages and being called back it would be wise to set aside every evening for a week to phone every student in a group of 20. This is a substantial chunk out of the meagre few hours the OU pays ALs for individual student support.



Perhaps it would be better to focus our attention on the new “at risk” students identified as benefiting from our extra attention, but

which ones are they? By the time they have marked a couple of TMAs most ALs will be quite clear about this, but before the course has started it’s a bit of a guessing game. It could be the ones with Additional Requirements (AR), but experience shows this is not much of a guide. It could be the ones who have few previous qualifications. The National Director does not tell us, so perhaps the document he refers to will be helpful. He does not give a reference, but I tracked it down at <https://intranet-gw.open.ac.uk/student-services/lfs/documents/lfs-phase-one-report.pdf>

Page 8, Key Activity 2 Pre-course contact. The first surprise is that the report does not refer to contact by ALs at all, but by regional staff. Moreover, “there has been much feedback from Regions asking for a clearer definition of the purpose of this welcome call” and “Regions would also welcome an early review of the vulnerability model itself, as designed by IET. As we gain more institutional knowledge about our vulnerable students, and as our student demographics change, some students are being selected who seem not to be vulnerable, and further clarification and work is required to ensure that the institution selects those students who would most benefit from a welcome contact.” It seems that the benefits of phone calls from ALs are less clear cut than the National Director would like us to believe.

Indeed the benefit he quotes of 5% improved retention is not impressive. If each AL has say two vulnerable students in a group of 20, ten ALs will have to phone 200 students between them to achieve one extra student retained. The benefit for students not classed as vulnerable has not been examined. Any sensible manager would conclude that telephoning every student is not a cost effective way for employees to spend their time, but here’s the rub. Instead of the university paying regional staff to contact vulnerable students, ALs are asked to do it for free, without a list of such students, and without even considering that the AL may already be in contact with the student concerned – just phone the lot and pay the bill! The National Director does not instruct ALs to do this, he just asks them to consider it. However, many ALs will take such a request from their National Director as an instruction; after all he does not go to the expense of writing them a letter very often. The more cynical among us will do as he asks and “consider” it, before filing his letter where it belongs, in the bin.

Sue Hawthorne, ALs Officer

Vacancies in our Branch



AL Regional Reps: there are vacancies for AL regional reps in London and in Ireland. (Full list of reps at ucu.open.ac.uk/al-reps)

Walton Hall departmental reps: we are still looking for a UCU member to act as a rep in the following Walton Hall units, the only duty you would be asked to do is to put up posters/publicity in your department. (Full list of WH departmental reps at ucu.open.ac.uk/people)

Regional/national centre reps—we are still looking for UCU members to act as a rep in Oxford, Gateshead and East Grinstead. (Full list of regional/national centre reps at ucu.open.ac.uk/people)

If you are interested in taking one of these roles, please contact Deb on 01908 6(53069) or email ucu@open.ac.uk or call into Room 015, Wilson C block.

Audit	Human Resources	Secretary's Office
Business Development Unit (BDU)	Information Office	Strategy Office
Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum	Institute of Educational Technology (IET)	Student Services
Communications	Knowledge Media Institute (KMi)	Vice Chancellor's office
Development Office	Learning, Teaching and Quality (LTO)	
Faculty of Science	Maths, Computing and Technology faculty	
Finance	Open Media Unit (OMU)	

New rep in Library Services

Sam Taylor has agreed to be the departmental rep in the Library and so we now have 13 departmental reps at Walton Hall, thank you to Sam!

Spare branch banner

We now have 2 branch banners in the UCU office at Walton Hall—if anyone wants to borrow one for a demonstration or rally that they are attending, please get in touch. Call 01908 6(53069), email ucu@open.ac.uk or call into room 015, Wilson C block at Walton Hall.



Colour copies of Spark

Our Branch Administrator has a list of people who she sends colour printed copies of Spark to, and they then leave them in common rooms, shared areas or on a notice board—if you have an area where you could leave a copy of Spark then please contact Deb on ucu@open.ac.uk or 01908 6(53069) or call in to room 015, Wilson C block.



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Your Executive Committee 2010-11

- President: Roger Walters (r.j.walters)
Honorary Secretary: Lesley Kane (l.h.kane)
Honorary Treasurer: David Knowles (d.w.knowles)
Vice Presidents: Pauline Collins & Bethan Norfor
Immediate Past President: N/a as Roger Walters
Equality Officer: Jonathan Jewell
Central Academic Staff Officer: Sheila Tyler
Central Academic-Related Staff Officer: Jenny Edwards
Regional/National Academic Staff Officer: Judy Ekins
Regional/National Academic-Related Staff Officer: Hilary Partridge
Associate Lecturers Officer: Sue Hawthorne
Ordinary Members:
John Bennett
Chris Bollom
Eric Bowers
Gill Clough
Axel Hagermann
Bruce Heil
John James
Malcolm Jenner
Maria McCrea
Mike McNulty
Philip O'Sullivan
June Payne
John Peters
Peter Piper
Eric Wade
NEC Members:
Alan Carr
Pauline Collins
Lesley Kane
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.

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.



Canvas bag



Mouse mat



UCU mug



A6 notepad



Lanyard



Pens



Publicity posters

Branch meetings

Future scheduled branch meeting dates are as follows:

22nd November 2011, 12.30pm, AGM in the Berrill Lecture theatre—will also be webcast via the Stadium website: <http://stadium.open.ac.uk/stadia/preview.php?whichevent=1787&s=1>

28th November 2011, 12.30pm in the Berrill Lecture theatre—Open meeting to celebrate UK Disability History month with speaker Richard Rieser—this meeting will also be webcast via Stadium website: <http://stadium.open.ac.uk/stadia/preview.php?whichevent=1788&s=1>

