

Dear LUCU members,

We've been very busy and have lots of news to report!

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Failure To Agree - the first step of our dispute

Please see attached email exchange and Failure to Agree notice that we have served on management this morning, following on from the motion agreed at our EGM on 1 Oct (minutes of that are also attached).

General Meeting next Friday

We are calling a GM on Friday 16th October, 1-2pm, to listen to your views on next steps if the dispute is not resolved. A zoom link will be circulated nearer the time.

Joint Unions statement on VC message

The 3 campus unions have issued a joint statement in response to the VC's online message from 2 October, in which he claimed that the university "has been working with trade unions to risk assess all that we are doing". This is not quite true. [http://all 3 campus unions in response to the VC's online message from 2 October: <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/users/unison/joint-union-statement-responding-to-vcs-start-of-year-message/>] Read more here.

Special Higher Education Sector Conference (SHESC)

A special higher education (HE) sector conference met on 30 September. Various motions were submitted and can be found here: https://www.ucu.org.uk/hesc_sept20. We'd particularly like to draw your attention to motions 2, 10, 11, 12, and 16 (all carried). Motions 2 and 16 were passed at our GM last month, while Sunil supported University of Glasgow for motion 11 and spoke in its favour. Overall, we are making progress in fighting for Fixed Term & Casual Workers, GTA and PGR rights.

Universities Superannuation Scheme (Pension Fund) update

USS is consulting with employers on the technical provisions for the 2020 valuation which closes on 30th October. This is a crucial window for branches to put pressure on employers and shape their responses to the consultation. The three campus unions have been invited to send a representative to share our feedback at a meeting with the Council sub-committee on pensions which is meeting on 15th October. The unions have agreed that our branch president Sunil should attend.

There is a lot to digest in the USS consultation document but if you don't have time to read it cover to cover, here are some of the key issues:

- USS's benchmarking of its own discount rate against other schemes is too conservative.
- The discount rate does not reflect the specific strengths of its employer covenant.
- The consultation falls short of or does not address the recommendations of the UCU-UUK Joint Expert Panel (JEP) in various ways.
- If employers try to close the defined benefit element of the scheme, as they tried to in 2017-18, they are likely to face higher contributions for deficit recovery than they will if it stays open.
- There are reasons to doubt USS's claims about their legal obligations, especially with respect to the balance between protecting accrued benefits and providing future benefits.

UUK's advisers, Aon, have also released a response to the USS consultation. [You can find it along with other UUK documentation here.](#)

USS petition about dismissal of Prof. Jane Hutton

We invite colleagues who are members of USS to [sign and circulate this petition](#), asking the USS board to revisit the decision to suppress the report and legal costs associated with the dismissal of UCU-nominated trustee and whistleblower Prof. Jane Hutton.

Lecture capture

We asked management for an assurance that the established custom and practice of recording lectures on an opt-in basis still stands, and that consent would be sought from staff to use their recordings with overseas LU campuses/partners. We have received the following response:

"In relation to the issues around recording of lectures, we can continue with current practice of opt-in for recordings, but we would seek clarification from colleagues who do not opt-in to record lectures how they plan to devise/deliver asynchronous lecture materials. We are aware of staff concerns related to developing teaching materials for online delivery, including film and sound recordings. To allay these concerns, we are committed to not use teaching-related film and sound recordings created during academic years (2019/20 and 2020/21) without the originators' consent."

Workloads

We have asked for reassurance that departments will be provided with additional staff (as well as replacing essential staff resources lost due to retirements, resignations and voluntary reductions of hours) and financial support to deal with the increased workloads and demands caused by covid-19, to ensure that workloads revert back to what they were before the covid-19 crisis as soon as possible.

Management have told us that "workloads are being carefully monitored, alongside other issues such as SSRs (staff-student relations), timetabling etc. It is fully acknowledged that colleagues across the university have had to go above and beyond to help us successfully navigate the pandemic and ensure business continuity. As committed previously the data relating to the vacancy control process can be shared with trade union colleagues."

PGR issues

We have raised a number of issues concerning our PGR members with Chris Edwards, Director of the Doctoral Academy, and the HR Director. We have asked for protection of GTA/PGR teaching allocations, and we have been assured that no PGR will be asked to do voluntary “CV-boosting” work.

We have secured an extension for all PGR members (PhD/Postdoc) with a start date prior to Oct 2020, to have 6 months added on to the end of their final year, although huge concerns remain regarding fees, especially for self-funded PGR students. The university has assured us it will look at each case of financial hardship and will be as flexible as possible. Please contact our PGR rep Ellie Fielding-Redpath if you have any concerns.

We have also heard that the University may be moving towards requiring that supervision meetings are recorded. Obviously we are very concerned about this and will be raising it at our next meeting with HR on Monday.

UCU/NUS joint statement

We sent the [UCU and NUS joint statement](#) to the HR Director, but we have not received any response to this yet.

AREL aka Sabbaticals

UCU has agreed the following position on sabbaticals with the employer:

“The academic research and education leave (a.k.a. sabbatical leave) policy gives academic staff members on fixed term contracts a right to apply, but the employer has no formal obligation to agree leave. In contrast, the policy gives staff academic members on indefinite contracts a conditional right to sabbatical leave (now called academic research and education leave, AREL). This right is conditional on 1) having worked a sufficiently long qualifying period, 2) an application judged against three specific considerations stated in the policy, and 3) on the HoD being given a sufficient planning horizon to be able to plan cover. This means that the policy does not give an absolute right to sabbatical leave; that would have meant, for example, getting a sabbatical automatically every 7th year without needing to apply. The policy also does not give academic staff members on indefinite contracts merely a right to apply; it gives them an entitlement to AREL if the conditions stated above are met.

As part of its handling of current financial pressures, with its financial exposure intensified by the COVID pandemic, the employer has implemented a temporary stop to AREL, in parts of the organisation. Meanwhile, the entitlement to AREL that staff members have accrued prior to COVID is safe, and staff members will continue to accrue entitlement during the stop.”

We note with concern that the employer has not explained when the temporary stop will be over, nor what will happen to the predictable peak in demand for AREL afterwards.

Bullying audit

The University has commissioned PWC to conduct an audit of the implementation of the bullying, harassment and misconduct policy following intense pressure and campaigning from UCU over the last two years about endemic institutional bullying cultures. We have been asking for the scope of the audit to be widened to include feedback from all the campus unions, and a meeting with PWC is currently being arranged.

Covid stats

We are pleased that the university has listened to us, on this at least, and started [publishing numbers of staff and students who test positive for Covid](#).

Fundraising and support for self-isolating students

Lancaster Uni Labour club has set up a [GoFundMe page](#) for emergency food deliveries for our isolating students stuck in halls. Please support if you can.

Other universities are offering isolating students free food or rent discounts, but ours was charging £17.95 for a daily food box. After much bad publicity this appears to have been removed from the list of sources of food recommended by the University in its [advice for isolating students](#).

There are questions of judgement and moral leadership here. Why can't the university prioritise food for isolated students over other commercial/financial considerations? This will be a drop in the ocean in a budget of £300M. UPP (campus accommodation provider) has not contributed anything towards supporting university finances as far as we know, despite making millions every year. Their contract ends in 2044. If students don't keep paying their huge rent bills, the University has to pay the shortfall to UPP - presumably a key reason why senior management is resisting calls to move most teaching online.

Let's also not forget students living in town too.

FOI request about VC residences

The University has refused to tell us how much rent the VC is paying to live at the University-owned property at Forrest Hills which was recently purchased and furnished at a cost of more than £0.5M. We did however learn that the former VC residence (The Croft on Bailrigg Lane) remains empty and not generating any income for the University.

Who to contact if you need support

If you are coming under pressure to do in-person teaching and don't feel safe, or you need UCU support for another work-related problem, please contact your [departmental rep](#), or you can request casework support via Louise Banton (lbanton@ucu.org.uk).

A reminder that there are template letters available at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/covid19letters> - you may need your membership number to access. You may also find that the [Individual Risk Assessment](#) helps to make a case for working from home.