

Faculty Representatives Termly Report

2017-18 (Termly Report 2)

Your Name: Angus O'Brien
Your Faculty & Role: Arts and Humanities Faculty Representative (undergrad)

Faculty Priorities:

What do you think the most pressing student needs in the Faculty are? How/why have you come to this conclusion?

Second term this year has been, let's say, *quite an interesting one*. The UCU strike certainly came to dominate my – and likely most other students in the Faculty's – time in the weeks after reading week. The clear and most pressing need became that of helping in the effort to win the strike, not only to attempt to reduce the disruption to students but primarily to defend staff pensions against the attacks on their pensions. Of course, to many students this was a question of their own futures: can we envisage going into an academic career where there is no guarantee that it will be possible to live on the drastically reduced pension? It was, further, a question of teaching conditions, the proposed pension cuts marking yet another step in the marketisation of higher education in the UK.

While the strike ultimately ended in disappointment – there being no guarantee that the 'Joint Expert Panel' will have the power to overturn the cuts that led to the strike in the first place – through conversations with students and staff on the picket lines, at teach-outs and in meetings during this time, it has become clear that a new vision for our university is required – and that many of us have ideas for what this is and want to begin building it. As I come to the end of my term as Arts and Humanities Faculty Rep (undergrad), the most pressing student needs are all relevant to this discussion. It is a question of who the university actually is – is it the managers who have no student-facing duties or the staff and students who are here to teach, learn and facilitate the running of the university as a university – not a business.

On a faculty-specific level, this has manifested in an inability to resist the increasing centralisation of control at the university. Where students contact me with an issue, the ability to change it tends to lie with a few centred in the offices of the Provost and Vice-Provosts – while most of these issues tend to originate in decisions initially made at these levels and sent down with little to no consultation to our faculty. Inadequate mental health funding, the new visa-monitoring requirements, high rents, overcrowding in lecture theatres and libraries – these

are all symptoms of managers trying to make their mark on the university, bypassing and ignoring those who are here simply to teach or to learn.

The first step in addressing the lack of democratic oversight and control over the future of our university has been the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry in the Academic Board – for which I was a signatory of the original letter requesting a meeting of the Board for this purpose – to review the structures of governance at UCL and propose reforms. As such, this last term has clearly seen momentum pick up in terms of demanding the fundamental changes required at UCL – the groundwork has certainly been laid for students and staff in the faculty and beyond to reshape our university into one in which education is once again put first.

Meetings in the Faculty:

Discuss any meetings you've attended with the Faculty – this might include formal committees, such as Faculty Teaching Committees, and informal meetings with Faculty staff. What was discussed? What were the outcomes? What did you say and how did it go?

During the last term, I have attended Faculty Teaching Committees, two meetings of the Academic Board and the Student Experience Committee. I also attended UCU meetings during the strike to act as a means of communication between students and staff on strike – linking students taking action in support of the strike with staff taking strike action themselves, and vice versa.

Through the Academic Board, as noted, the Commission of Enquiry has been established to look into governance at the university. In the Student Experience Committee, staff with oversight into the mental health services at the university presented their plans to improve the provision and confirmed their bid for increased funding for Student Psychological Services.

Meetings with the Union:

What priorities have you raised with the Union as a representative of your Faculty, either as part of Council, or in informal meetings with officers such as the Faculty Rep Forum? What is the Union working on that you think might have a positive/negative impact on your faculty? What would could the Union do for students in your faculty that you'd like to see?

Much of what I have raised with the Union as a representative centred on the strike this term, too, as it student support for staff taking this action would prove particularly important. This involved passing and acting on a motion in support of striking staff at the General Assembly.

Moving forward, however, work being done by the Union in relation to mental health provision, visa-monitoring requirements and removing hidden costs for degrees should make a considerable difference to students in the faculty moving into the next few academic years. I also hope to see the Union and its elected representatives recognise and keep up the momentum that is growing in imagining and creating a new future for our university - realising that working closely with staff - not Senior Management - is the best way to enact change moving forward.