

Faculty Representatives Termly Report

2017-18 (Termly Report 2)

Your Name: Matthew Smith

Your Faculty & Role: Undergraduate Faculty Representative for Brain Sciences

Faculty Priorities:

In my judgement, undergraduate brain scientists consider the following to be priorities...

- Compensation for financial loss due to recent strike action-many individuals have highlighted to me that they wish to be reimbursed for tuition that wasn't received.
- Communication with the faculty to establish whether or not students' marks will be elevated at all since they were educationally disadvantaged so much by the industrial action.
- Clarification about where exactly points are scored during the marking process- A number of students have mentioned to me that they are completely unaware of what warrants marks in their assessors' eyes. Often a very generic rubric is attached to coursework feedback but this is not enough!
- The distribution of assessment methods across the faculty. Some departments have an enormous amount of exams and too little coursework while other departments suffer the opposite problem. However, in this area, progress does seem to be happening albeit slowly.
- End-of-year celebrations. In many cases, departments throw gatherings for their students after exams. This is wonderful but many of these events occur too late i.e. once students have returned home which is particularly sad for finalists.

Meetings in the Faculty:

During Term 2, I attended one Teaching Committee Meeting and one SSCC meeting. A Faculty-level meeting was also scheduled but I chose not to attend since it was not my wish to cross any picket-lines. Those formal discussions for which I did appear were eventually highly productive and with some hearty encouragement, all the student representatives present managed to convince the staff to converse with students openly and honestly about how the strikes would affect their modules. Initially, staff had no intention to be so upfront as they originally sought to adopt a very secretive approach so that students' education

would be maximally disrupted, ensuring that their protest movements would be as powerful as possible.

Meetings with the Union:

Alongside my brilliant friend and colleague Disa Witkowska (Lead departmental representative for Linguistics), I organised a meeting with Sarah Al-aride (the Union's current Education Officer) to discuss the university's emphatic but displeasing promotion of NSS completion. With Sarah the issue of impending strike action was also raised. Overall this session was extremely helpful in that it enabled us to prepare adequately for the worst but hope strongly for the best. Since my last report, I have also liaised with Diana Hawk (A Leadership Development manager for the Union) in order to reflect on my experience as an undergraduate Faculty Representative. This dialog was also very beneficial.

Other comments:

1. To express the students' consternation at the furious dispute between UCU and UUK last term, I jointly composed a letter with a team of departmental representatives from across the faculty. The message was addressed to the provost and Vice-provost and is stated in full below.

"Dear Professor Arthur and Professor Smith,

We hope you are well.

During the course of our day-to-day activities within the Faculty of Brain Sciences, we interact with a magnificent myriad of fellow students who hail from all over the world and who have brought with them a wealthy supply of knowledge, experience and beliefs. Needless to say then that we belong to an extraordinarily diverse community and yet the peers with whom we mingle are the same in the sense that they have shared a strong sense of pride and pleasure at being educated on programmes offered by UCL. It saddens us deeply that 'share' in the previous sentence could not appear in present tense; over the last few months, our fondness for UCL as an institution has faded. Education, as you must surely know, is a concept based around trust. That is, trust that all information conveyed is accurate but also trust that the organisation reining over the learning process is an ethical one. There can be no doubt that the university's lecturers work assiduously to ensure that the content they deliver is undiluted in its accuracy. However, recently UCL has given its students cause to worry

that the intellectual powerhouse at which they grow wiser is behaving shockingly by pulling the rug of financial security in retirement from under the feet of its admirable workforce.

It is our understanding that to test how effectively the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) could resist disintegration in the context of a financial crisis, mathematical simulations were conducted corresponding to a fictitious worst-case scenario in which many of Britain's finest centres of scholarship entered bankruptcy. After USS was unable to perfectly cope with this pretend predicament, Universities UK (UUK) produced the deceptive claim that the scheme was actually showing a deficit. Furthermore, UUK decided to alter the pension arrangements for academics nationally. This action sparked outrage from the University and College Union (UCU) who pushed for reconsideration. Amid cries of anger, UUK have proceeded in the march towards their original endeavour and, as far as we are aware, UCL's senior leaders are happy to shrug their shoulders at this alarming proposal. According to the open letter published online by *The Times Higher Education*, these threatening changes will most adversely affect younger lecturers. Now, allow us to remind you that not even twelve months have passed since Professor Arthur stated to a journalist for the Guardian that "there aren't so many young academics around which is an issue". We are fundamentally baffled by how our provost can acknowledge this shortage and then fail to protest the revocation of pension benefits which have been responsible for attracting young job applicants to academia in the first place.

As we are sure you can imagine, students on the whole are exceedingly empathetic towards the plight of their lecturers as they relate to them in respect of the fact that those striving for a degree are seeking to secure a decent future for themselves by earning respectable qualifications. Likewise, staff members are striving to secure a financially healthy future for themselves and their families. We feel that this is an aspect of the matter at hand which is worth emphasising since while you may be inclined to mentally group all experts within the university's departments into one faceless crowd, we students on the other hand know that these employees are people whose partners and children would suffer detrimental material and emotional consequences if a close relative of theirs became burdened by financial difficulty. As such, we urge you to recommence negotiations with UCU as soon as possible.

Now that they find themselves in a such a regrettable position, our module instructors are striking and the impact that this expression of unsettlement is mounding on budding brain scientists is truly devastating for us representatives and societal coordinators to witness. Some individuals have even shed tears over how drastically they envisage their grades plummeting due to a decrease in contact time with their educators. In addition, many student-initiated projects and

events have required postponement and, in some cases, cancellation because participants who themselves are academics have declared an unwillingness to contribute while these strikes occur. Moreover, these student-initiated projects have consumed so much time and energy to prepare that now their orchestrators feel considerably disheartened. So, the justifiable protest by staff, which has been provoked by petulant reluctance on the part of UUK to maintain a constructive dialog with UCU has resulted in contentment dropping to an all-time low within our formerly cheerful faculty. Meanwhile, anxiety levels have soared to an all-time high.

We firmly believe that it is reasonable of the students in Brain Sciences to expect a complete apology (at the very least) for their personal distress and loss of lectures. This situation has become a reality due to modifications which will worsen pension policy by an estimated £10,000 annually for professionals who passionately sharpen the minds of the next generation in classrooms across the institution over which you preside. As exceptionally intelligent human beings, there must be some part of you that accepts students and staff deserve better than this!

In summary, the vast majority of Brain Sciences' population at our university is appalled by UUK's obstinacy and we vehemently encourage UCL to promote resumption of negotiations. Another core aim of this message was to impress upon you the fear and frustration that these strikes have inflicted upon students. At the very least, an unreserved apology ought to be extended to the learners in our faculty whose educational path has now been beset with depressing hurdles. For you to ignore these concerns of ours would frankly represent the height of discourtesy. Therefore, if seven days elapse without a reply containing a commitment to deal with these pressing problems, then we are afraid there will be no other option but for us to enlist the involvement of local MP Keir Starmer.

Many thanks for your time.

Yours Faithfully,

Melody Wang and Matthew Smith (Faculty Representatives for Brain Sciences)
Disa Witkowska (Lead Representative for Linguistics)
Yinjue Chang (Representative for Linguistics)
Yutong Zhang (Representative for Linguistics)
Warona George (Lead Representative for Psychology and Language Sciences)
Greta Nolan (Representative for Psychology and Language Sciences)
Adriana Zainurin (Representative for Psychology and Language Sciences)
Joe Dixey (Linguistics Society-President)
Pauline Ries (Linguistics Society-Treasurer)
Camila de la Parra (Linguistics Society-Academic Officer)

Oliver Woodhouse (Linguistics Society-Social Secretary)
Jessica Arnold (Linguistics Society-Design Officer)
Jiayi Chong (Linguistics Society-Publicity Officer)”

The reply we were granted was so unsatisfactory that it doesn't even deserve comment.

2. I have not forgotten that in my manifesto, I promised to endeavour wholeheartedly to hold monthly departmental meetings so that any or all undergraduates in the faculty could consult me regarding issues they were facing. However, early in the year, a close relative of mine became terminally ill and so I need to devote myself entirely to family matters. Please allow me to impress upon you just how sorry I am about not being able to fulfil a commitment in my manifesto. In light of my incredibly difficult personal circumstances this year, I ask that you forgive this specific inability to deliver.