

## Education Zone December 2019 – Students Support the UCU Strike Briefing

### What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

As of Monday 26<sup>th</sup> November, many academic and administrative staff who are members of the University and College Union (UCU) are on strike across campus. This is as a result of strike ballots conducted in October, where 83.6% of UCL UCU members voted in favour of strike action over pensions (1101 of 1323 votes), and 80.8% of members voted in favour of strike action over pay and conditions (1086 of 1348 votes). In both ballots, just under 90% of members voted for industrial action short of a strike, such as a marking or assessment boycotts.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, both ballots reached the threshold for industrial action set out by the Trade Union Act of 2016, which requires a 50% turnout before workers can go on strike. UCL turnout was approximately 51% in both ballots, with around 2600 UCL UCU members in total.

In response to this issue, UCL President & Provost Michael Arthur issued a statement suggesting that UCL are working nationally to encourage discussions between UCU and Universities UK (UUK), who represent universities across the country and negotiate on pensions, as well as between UCU and the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA), who negotiate on pay and conditions. Arthur suggests that UCL “continue to lobby nationally for outcomes that respond to the concerns of our staff and safeguard the interests of our students”, whilst also encouraging that issues be resolved with the aim of avoiding industrial action.<sup>2</sup>

With regards to the direct impact on students, a large proportion of teaching has been cancelled, and UCL has informed students that departments are responsible for informing them about changes to the teaching schedule through email and Moodle, but to bear in mind that striking staff do not have to tell UCL in advance. With regards to crossing picket lines to attend teaching that is still taking place, UCL gives students the option to choose not to do so, but also adds that students should “be aware that there may be a negative impact on your studies if you miss classes that have not been cancelled”.<sup>3</sup> UCL UCU have given suggestions of what students can do to help, including letting staff know that they are supported and joining members on picket lines, teach-outs and learning events.<sup>4</sup>

### What is the relevant national/ international context to this situation?

As mentioned previously, UCU are striking over two main issues. The first of these is pensions, and is often called USS (Universities Superannuation Scheme), which is the private pension scheme for most UK universities. UCU explain this action by pointing out that a change in the pension scheme in 2011 has caused retirement benefits to rise while pension costs rise, pointing to actuarial analysis which suggests the average USS member stands to lose £240,000 in retirement. Strike action on this issue was taken in 2018 which led to the halting of plans to close the defined benefit portion of the scheme and a Joint Expert Panel was convened to undertake a new valuation, however recommendations from this panel have not yet been implemented,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10399/UCU-members-back-strikes-over-both-pensions-and-pay-and-conditions>

<sup>2</sup> <https://uclnews.org.uk/t/UAA-6L3GC-BBUGAA3A64/cr.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/ucl-and-university-and-college-union-industrial-action-your-questions-answered>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucu/campaigns/he-industrial-action-november-2019/information-students>

leading to this wave of industrial action.<sup>5</sup> In recent days, UUK have made a formal commitment to working with UCU on long-term USS pension scheme reform, whilst pointing to a 50% increase in employer contribution (14% to 21.1%) over the last decade.<sup>6</sup>

The second strike issue is pay and conditions, with UCU suggesting that the 1.8% pay rise offered by employers is below inflation and therefore a real terms pay cut for staff, with the value of pay in HE falling by around 20% since 2009. This issue also covers other areas such as gender and race pay gaps in the HE sector, workload (the average working week in HE is now above 50 hours) and casualisation (70% of researchers are employed on fixed-term contracts).<sup>7</sup> In response, UCEA suggested that UCU's decision to re-open the concluded 2019-20 national pay round as "completely unrealistic", and stated that the outcome of these talks was "already at the very limit of what is affordable".<sup>8</sup>

## Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

In February 2019 a policy was passed supporting a yes vote in the UCU pay and equality ballot which lapses in 2021<sup>9</sup>, and in February 2018 a policy was passed supporting the wave of UCU strikes that was taking place at the time.<sup>10</sup> However, this policy can be considered differentiated as it relates to the current wave of industrial action taking place, and specifically relates to action related to the strike itself and not the ballot.

## Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

No

## Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder/ public relations issues with this policy proposal?

With regards to stakeholder and public relations issues, there is precedent for students' organisations issuing statements in support of the UCU disputes. In November 2019 the NUS and UCU issued a joint statement in support of the action and encouraging members of the NUS to "participate in local demonstrative solidarity action, both during the disputes and the likely strikes, in support of UCU members".<sup>11</sup> Many other Students' Unions have passed motions to support academic staff who are taking industrial action, including Warwick and Oxford.

The financial implications of using communication and social media channels are minimal, as well as those needed to produce guides to students. However, it is unclear of the financial implications of providing "reasonable financial support to any UCL student groups who are partaking in action to support the strike".

## What would the next steps be if the motion passed?

Meet with the motion proposer to work out a plan for communications and producing the guidance suggested.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10467/UCU-statement-on-latest-pay-talks?list=1676>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/University-leaders-make-formal-commitment-to-working-with-UCU-on-long-term-USS-pension-scheme-reform-.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ucu.org.uk/he2019-explained>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ucea.ac.uk/news-releases/5nov19/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://studentsunionucl.org/policy/up1810/students-union-ucl-supports-yes-vote-in-ucu-pay-and-equality-ballot>

<sup>10</sup> <http://studentsunionucl.org/policy/up1711/support-ucu-strike>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ucu.org.uk/UCU-NUS-jointstatement>