

The Open University Branch
of the University and College
Union

September 2020
Issue 1



AL Newsletter

Bulletin for AL UCU members at The Open University

Your NEW OU AL Newsletter

Welcome to the new UCU Associate Lecturer (AL) Newsletter. Please share with colleagues and encourage others to join and support UCU. This newsletter has been put together by ALs with additional material from others. All members of our AL Reps Committee sit on the Editorial Board of this newsletter, however, we welcome contributions from any AL member of UCU. Two Lecturers in FASS have provided one of the articles, on page 3.

As UCU members, we are very privileged to have a hard-working Branch Executive and to open the Newsletter, Branch President Caitlin Adams outlines what UCU at the Open University has been doing to make your lives better.



Inside this issue

Branch President.....	2
New Courses.....	3
eTMA system.....	4
WISEflow	5
Secret AL	6
Race Equality	7
AL redundancy.....	8
Contact us	8



OU Branch of UCU President: Caitlin Adams

The union for academic and academic-related staff at the Open University is UCU. As a recognised trade union we have an agreement with the university to negotiate on key contractual terms and conditions such as recruitment, promotion, pay, sickness procedures, grievances, and disciplinary processes. During the pandemic, our statutory role in Health and Safety has gained in importance - our H&S reps consult on risk assessments and planning relating to office and teaching environments.

UCU also successfully negotiated payment for ALs this Spring for the 2 days of additional annual leave offered to staff, and where work unexpectedly stopped because of COVID.

JOIN UCU

If you're not already a member, there's never been a better time to join. It's affordable because the subs rates are based on your annual salary:

www.ucu.org.uk/join

Or join by phone:

0333 207 0719

Lines open 9.15am-4.45pm Monday-Friday

UCU was one of the founders of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) so it has a national role in defending Higher Education pension benefits. Fighting for job security and equality is also a fundamental priority, both locally and nationally.

For individuals, UCU supports members with questions or problems that arise from employment. The branch helps with over 200 cases a year, about half of which are from our AL members. These range from one-off inquiries to supporting members through formal grievance or disciplinary procedures. In 2021 the new AL Contract will be implemented. This has taken over a decade to negotiate, and we hope that it will bring significant benefits for Associate Lecturers and the university. While that's a main focus it isn't the only one. Other important campaigns for this year include supporting efforts to build an anti-racist institution; ensuring new systems (such as the eTMA system) work for our members; and keeping environmental sustainability at the heart of the OU's planning.



New Courses in FASS: Dan McCulloch & Deborah Drake

The BA (Hons) Criminology takes a cutting-edge approach to thinking about criminology. Whilst each of the constituent modules offers students insights into criminology, the degree as whole helps students to evaluate, understand and deconstruct taken-for-granted ideas about crime and justice, and develop critical thinking skills that often centre on questioning the very concept of crime and societal responses to it. The degree introduces students to the idea of **social harm**, which encourages consideration of a broader range of harmful activities that are not strictly defined as crimes, but which may ultimately cause more societal damage, injury and loss of life. The degree draws on the traditions of critical criminology at the OU, whilst also encouraging students to explore contemporary issues and questions in criminology. In doing so, the degree engages with topics at the heart of OU social scientific study – such as inequality, power and social justice.

Students start by exploring broad social science questions on DD102 (Introducing the Social Sciences), before moving into more specialist criminological study on DD105 (Introduction to Criminology), where they start to deconstruct ideas to do with crime, victims and justice. At the second level, students expand their theoretical and methodological knowledge on DD212 (Understanding Criminology) and DD215 (Social Research: Crime, Justice and Society) respectively. Following this, at the third level, students explore social harm in more depth on DD311 (Crime, Harm and the State), before applying the knowledge they have developed to a criminological topic of their choosing on DD315 (Current Topics in Criminology).

Fund the Future

This is a UCU UK-wide campaign to protect jobs, secure government funding for tertiary education, and make sure we emerge from this crisis with a better system than we entered it with.

Please support the campaign by:

Writing to your MP
Following UCU on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)
Sharing the website fundthefuture.org.uk/



OUBUCU Branch meetings

All UCU members are welcome to attend Branch meetings, the dates are all on our branch website:

<http://ucu.open.ac.uk/>

be protected



eTMA System - The Big Questions!

The eTMA system and file handler are central to the way we work. Perhaps one of the major, if unintended, benefits of our job is that the ability to mark offline gives us some control over when and where we carry out our main job of teaching through feedback and assessment, as long as we respect the ten working days return rules. Although the current system doesn't permit a range of things that would enhance the quality of our work and the student experience, at least we can do it (pre-Covid 19 anyway) while taking a train to a meeting, and even if our internet connection at home is poor and patchy, we can get round this by downloading and uploading multiple assignments when we have the chance.

The new WISEFlow system does not currently allow bulk up-load for offline marking. Both the union and the AL Assembly have received various assurances that the university is 'listening' to AL concerns about the new WISEFlow system, but as it stands it still leaves much to be desired with some clear issues still problematic (offline marking is talked of in terms of 'if', the use of PDFs may complicate commenting on student texts and require additional software, marked work must be uploaded individually, mathematical and other special symbols may not yet be supported). ALs urgently need absolute reassurance that the functionalities they need to do their work will be provided. The branch recognises the importance of offline marking in giving us some control over our working lives and that a compulsion to online marking will discriminate against ALs who cannot afford or otherwise don't have 24/7 access to a fast, reliable internet connection.

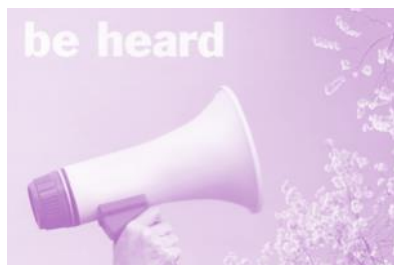
For the branch, the capacity for good offline working is an 'absolutely non-negotiable' aspect of the new system.

WISEFlow anti-plagiarism software and the transfer of responsibility for referrals

A small number of DD102 ALs have been/are being recruited to a pilot project giving them full access to a 'similarity tool' (plagiarism detection software) integrated into the WISEFlow marking system. Key aims of the pilot are to enable ALs to integrate comments on plagiarism in their feedback to students and the potential for policy and process changes that could extend the AL role to responsibility for referring students for study skills or to the Academic Conduct Officers.

Such a change would have far-reaching implications for ALs. On the one hand, a greater autonomy to engage with students over issues of academic integrity increases the complexity and responsibility of the AL role. On the other, however, decisions around the type of referral necessary in different types of cases are tricky and time-consuming, and communications with students 'caught' by the software will be fraught with sensitivities. The current policies and processes surrounding plagiarism are indeed cumbersome (and as a result expensive), and this is an explicit reason why the pilot is designed to explore whether ALs could absorb this work.

Any transfer of additional work into the AL role must be subject to AL agreement and negotiation in relation to staff development and compensation for additional workload.



OU Branch of UCU AL reps committee, 2020-2021

All members of our AL Reps committee sit on the Editorial Board of this newsletter. Our AL reps committee meets regularly to discuss current AL issues. The committee has Standing Orders on our branch [website](#). Our AL Reps committee is organised by OU regions, and we have two vacancies in the East of England and Ireland, please contact the UCU office: ucu@open.ac.uk if you are interested in becoming an AL rep.

Current members of the Committee: Costas Athanasopoulos, Eric Bowers, Richard Bradbury, Sarah Brookes, Judy Ekins, Bruce Heil, Lesley Kane, Mark Kirby, Mike McNulty, Isabella Muzio, Tim Parry, Hilary Partridge, John Pearson, John Peters, Jason Phillips, Anita Pilgrim, Peter Piper, Jeremy Roebuck and Gerry Stroud.



Working in Lockdown - reflections from the Secret AL

Being an AL can be a solitary experience at the best of times, particularly since the closure of most regional offices. This was heightened with the lockdown from 23rd March. Partly the extent of this solitude depends on whether you live with others or live alone and the nature of your accommodation. These structural inequalities mean the experience will differ. But for all of us, the social aspect of the job will have reduced with no real prospect of this changing until at least January 2021. Normally, I have my computer to myself but faced a situation where my partner sometimes needed access and my child's school supplied homework which needed completing and emailing from said computer. Getting work completed did therefore sometimes involve an unseemly scramble for the computer.

None of this was particularly helped by some of the OU Management actions. Emails were sent out to students before ALs and on a Friday so any students concerned would only really be able to contact their tutor who in all likelihood did not necessarily know what was going on. Because the Student Support Team didn't have access to telephones, and at that time didn't have Webchat fully operational, ALs were the ones students found easiest to contact.

Obviously the job was made harder by the fact that other OU staff were working from home but the lack of timely effective consultation with reps of the ALs concerning these actions made their job harder, and if you happened to have a high number of anxious students in your group (who like us may have been affected by household loss of income due to furlough or worse, a family member or friend directly impacted by COVID) you might find your workload substantively increased. On the other hand, in some circumstances we were told not to contact education officers in secure institutions despite the fact they also needed to know what was happening. This was arguably far from ideal, to put it mildly. Thankfully UCU officers did at least secure a good will payment for ALs for this work, rather than the two days holiday originally offered - which it was explained to management would be impossible for us to take.

The UCU Branch also managed to get payment for cancelled exam work and any cancelled F2F sessions and lost income from EMA verification. Thankfully we have them to represent us in difficult circumstances.

OUBUCU Book Club

We have started an online UCU book club, open to non-members, initially to talk about race and ethnicity. The first two books were 'Why I No Longer Talk to White People about Race', and 'White Fragility'. There are some relevant resources in the university: the BME staff network email group and Friends of BME staff email group, Yammer groups, and a recently set up online monthly meeting for black and minority ethnic ALs. Contact the OU group BME Matters for further information: bme-matters@open.ac.uk Look out too, for a new race and ethnicity hub being developed on [OpenLearn](#).

The OU and Race Equality

As Associate Lecturers, we feel isolated in our working situation in ways which some of our internal staff colleagues are only beginning to appreciate as they also have to work from home. This isolation is exacerbated for black and minority ethnic staff. On those rare occasions we can join a staff event and meet other AL colleagues, we are likely to walk into a room where we will be the only person of black or minority ethnic background.

Unfortunately, it has become clear that racial discrimination and harassment are common across the Higher Education sector, and that the Open University - in spite of its values of inclusion and wider participation, is no different in this respect to other universities. It is not sufficient, as one person once said in a workshop I was in, that because we are online, we can't see our students' faces. The university has been concerned for a long time about what we are now starting to call the 'awarding gap' - in recognition that it is not individual achievement which is an issue, but the institution's failure to support black and minority ethnic students in having an equitable learning experience. A review by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission last year found widespread incidence of racial harassment unsupported by poor reporting systems. Our own failure to achieve Bronze Award in the Race Equality Charter exposed many problems - each of which means daily issues confront black and minority ethnic colleagues in our work.

The union has made a representation to the Vice Chancellor, Head of People Services and Director of Development which went over several reviews and reports made in the last few years at the OU. We drew up a list of recommendations out of this substantial body of material: using action plans which had been put forward some time ago, but not yet implemented, and also reflections on more recent developments in the sector. Interviews are going forward for a newly created position of Dean of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and we look forward to meeting the first person to take up this important role, and talking through what has been achieved and what further can be done to make ours an institution where black and minority ethnic staff and students can feel fully included in the "OU Family".



What do you want to read about in future issues?

Please email ucu@open.ac.uk with ideas for articles in future issues of this newsletter, we are planning to send 3 issues per year. You can either suggest articles you would like to read or articles you would like to write and contribute.

AL Redundancy Consultation (ALRC)

The purpose of these monthly meetings with management is to negotiate the avoidance or mitigation of emerging redundancy situations, mainly where ALs are at risk due to modules ending or a drop in student numbers (although other issues, such as loss of income due to changes in module parameters, can also constitute redundancy and come to the consultations).

In recent times the ALRC's role in negotiating mitigations and alternatives to redundancy has become even more important as most ALs want to maintain or possibly increase their work in the run-up to the FTE calculation for the new contract. Additionally, the new contract depends on mechanisms to facilitate the smooth transfer of ALs between modules, and the ALRC, sometimes in conjunction with the AL Negotiating Team, has been able to negotiate models that prefigure this. Principles that have already been quite widely experimented include 'light touch' transfers with paid staff development where necessary and the loosening of the old rules of geography that limited ALs to a Region. There are various instances of 'light touch' transfer in recent times, including AA100 to A111, A105 to A112 and A113, DD103 to DD102 vacancies.

If you teach on a module that is coming to an end by Spring 2021, or have any other issue potentially involving loss of module work or salary, please let UCU know: ucu@open.ac.uk with subject line ALRC.

CONTACT US

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