

May 2011

The Open University branch of UCU

The Spark

USS

Defend your USS pension rights

UCU members of the USS JNC were coerced into attending the JNC meeting on May 10th under threat of punitive legal action which would have bankrupted them and the Union.

Predictably, Sir Andrew Cubie (the "independent" Chair) broke with the convention that – in the absence of a majority – the casting vote should be used to preserve the status quo. Instead, he voted with the employers to force through rule changes which will devastate your pension scheme. If implemented in the autumn, the changes will cost hundreds of thousands of pounds in lost pensions expectations – almost half a million for a new entrant aged 30 and working for 35 years.

Your UCU negotiators have no intention of rolling over and accepting defeat. But, if we are to win this struggle, we will need to take draconian industrial action which goes way beyond tokenism and which applies real pressure on the employers to negotiate.

UCU negotiators are recommending:

- abandoning the ineffective tactic of further one day strikes;
- re-balloting members on much more serious action including a complete withdrawal from all work associated with admissions, assessment and examination.

The imposition of the employer proposals would create a so called "buffer" (a surplus of income over expenditure) equivalent to at least 6.5% of contribution income. This is intended to facilitate future cuts (from 16% to 10%) in employer contribution rates i.e. cuts to your deferred pay!

The implementation of the reasonable counter proposals from UCU would guarantee the continuation of decent pensions for all at a maximum cost equivalent to 3% of contribution income. This would cost the employers nothing by way of increased expenditure – though it would, of course, limit their ability to cut your deferred pay in future. And it would leave USS with a healthy reserve.

This dispute is winnable and a negotiated settlement is possible at no real cost to the employers.

Our message to the OU and to other employers is clear. Stop hiding behind the irresponsible **national employers' "representatives" who have got all of us into this mess. Get back to the table** and negotiate a fair settlement.

Alan Carr

Alan is a member of the OU UCU Branch Exec, National Treasurer of UCU and one of the UCU negotiators on USS issues.

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University centralises desktop support

The University has decided to centralise all IT desktop services at Walton Hall and other OU locations in the Milton Keynes and Wellingborough areas.

The intention is that in future all such support will be provided through the IT department rather than by staff working in and for academic and other units. IT staff working in regional and national centres are not affected.

The Council at its meeting on 10th May declared a potential redundancy situation which puts at risk 12 academic-related staff and over 40 secretarial and clerical staff. The University plans to reduce staffing numbers by up to about 15 staff, including 4 academic-related staff.

The decision of Council was announced to a meeting of affected staff on 12th May and details issued of a voluntary severance scheme and of a reopened - for affected staff - enhanced early retirement scheme. There is now a three months consultation period in which the University has to take steps to avoid, reduce or mitigate redundancies with a view to avoiding any compulsory redundancies.

UCU is working to support affected members and UNISON is supporting their members. As well as formal consultation with the unions and with the affected staff, the University is consulting all units about the impact of the proposed changes on IT desktop support for units.



Other redundancy situations

There have been a handful of redundancies in Communications as a result mainly of the continuing move from print to electronic forms of communications and in the Planetary and Space Sciences Research Institute (PSSRI) as a result of the ending of funding from a research council part way through a research project.

Travel and subsistence scheme

There are ongoing discussions with the University to develop a set of guidelines about the interpretation of the travel and subsistence scheme with a view to providing greater clarity and more consistency in the application of this scheme to all staff categories across the university. Among issues discussed are what sort of receipts are acceptable and the likely abandonment of the current maxima which have failed to keep pace with inflation. It is expected that these guidelines will be issued to all staff in the summer.

National dispute on redundancy avoidance

The Union's national Higher Education Committee has decided to take no further industrial action at this time, on the dispute with the employers over the development of a national redundancy avoidance procedure. This followed the industrial action ballot at the beginning of the year in which there was a very slim majority for strike action which was, in the view of the Higher Education Committee, far short of that necessary to shift the employers from their stubborn refusal to engage in meaningful discussion on this.

However we remain in dispute with the employers and will continue to press for robust redundancy avoidance procedure to be adopted locally.

National congress & HE Sector Conference

The national UCU Congress and the Higher Education Sector Conference take place over the weekend of 28th to 30th May 2011 in Harrogate. There will be a full delegation from the OU branch comprising: John Bennett, Social Sciences, Judy Ekins, Staff Tutor MCT East Midlands, Bruce Heil AL and Student Services, Scotland, Mike McNulty, AL North and Hilary Partridge, Student Services and AL North West. Branch members who are members of the UCU National Executive Committee - Alan Carr, Pauline Collins, Lesley Kane and Roger Walters - will also attend.

TMA Marking time survey

The UCU TMA marking time survey closed for new responses at the beginning of April. Results are published on the OU UCU website at http://ucu.open.ac.uk/associate_lecturers. We would like to thank all the ALs who took part. We may open a new survey in future, for now the results are being used in negotiations. Meanwhile the Faculty of Science has started its own TMA marking time survey which all ALs in that faculty are encouraged to complete.

New system for recording TMA extensions

Earlier this month the university implemented a new online system for ALs to record when they have allowed a student an extension to a TMA cut off date. In general we are pleased that the OU is making an effort to record accurate data on this. However, as so often with new OU systems, it seems likely to involve ALs in significant extra work. This especially applies to tutors on first level modules, when extensions are common as inexperienced students find it difficult to achieve the discipline to meet deadlines. The new system seems to imply an intention to tighten up the rules about extensions. There is a tension between the need to train students to get their work in on time and retention; ALs know that if extensions are refused the likely result is that students will drop out. Regional staff understand this too; it is rare for students who appeal to Student Support at regional level to be refused an extension, even over three weeks late, and I wonder if the designers of the new system have thought this through?

For the moment use of the system remains optional, so ALs will have to make up their own minds whether recording extensions in this way is helpful, or whether to stick to their own tried and tested methods.

National Union elections

Following national union elections earlier this year there are still four members of the OU branch on the UCU National Executive Committee. President Roger Walters was re-elected as the Disabled Representative for HE, Hon. Secretary Lesley Kane topped the poll in securing re-election as one of the three South constituency HE representatives, and Alan Carr was re-elected unopposed for a further term as National Treasurer. Pauline Collins, one of the branch Vice Presidents, is half way through a two year term as one of the women representatives in HE.

Among other elections, Simon Renton from University College London, who was supported by the recently established Independent Broad Left group in the union, convincingly defeated Jim Wulfreys, a member of UCU Left, from Kings College London, for the position of Vice President, Simon, whose nomination was supported by among others Roger Walters and Alan Carr, will chair the union's Higher Education Committee for two years and then become President in 2013.

Terry Hoad from Oxford University will take over as UCU President from the end of this year's Congress.



Improved OU policy on maternity pay & redundancy

At our Annual General Meeting in November the OU UCU branch passed a motion stating: -

"This AGM notes several recent cases of pregnant members of staff on fixed term contracts being told by the OU that they will have to repay part of their maternity pay if they are made redundant as a result of their contracts not being renewed. This is a result of the OU policy on maternity pay that requires staff going on maternity leave to commit to returning to work for at least three months in order to get full pay for the first 18 weeks of their maternity leave, and to pay back the difference if they do not return. This AGM considers it unfair and unjust to exact a financial penalty from these vulnerably employed members of staff who already face possible loss of employment and being unable to return to work due to circumstances entirely beyond their control. We believe the distress caused to pregnant members of staff in this position is totally disproportionate to any savings the OU stands to make, and indeed in some cases any money recovered should be returned to the funding organisations ..."

The motion went on to commit the branch to seek a re-negotiation of the policy and to campaign on this issue if necessary. At our AGM it was pointed out that it was, amongst other things, a health and safety issue because of the stress being inflicted on pregnant staff who were facing not only loss of employment with the OU but also having to lose or pay back their professional maternity pay.

Currently this issue affects fixed term contract staff, but the same policy would apply to any potentially redundant member of staff on maternity leave whether on a fixed term contract or a permanent contract. As a result of discussions and representations from the UCU branch there is now a new policy on this which can be found at: - <http://bit.ly/ITD6yh>

We are grateful that the OU management eventually saw the light on this, and to the UCU regional official, Lydia Richards, for helping us raise this matter with OU management.

New AL contract negotiations

Anyone who has been with the OU for a few years will know that the Student Support Review and the AL Role Review proposed a wider role for ALs and, in time, a smaller AL workforce with a greater commitment from ALs to the OU.

The aim of the current AL negotiations is also to complete the process of assimilating ALs to the single pay spine under the terms of the national Framework Agreement between UCU and Universities and Colleges Employers Association, and to make **real the frequent assertion that "ALs are staff"**. We set out below our key negotiating objectives.

Permanent Contract

The university has stated that it wishes to gradually increase the workload of ALs, and ALs will require greater stability of income and employment if they are to commit more time to the OU. It is unacceptable to ask ALs to invest a major part of their career in the OU and still have them living with the instability of employment that characterises the way ALs are employed at present.

The AL contract should be permanent, and not tied to particular modules. When a module comes to an end, it will normally be replaced, and ALs should automatically be redeployed to a new module. They should not have to continually re-apply for their jobs.

Only if there is a sustained drop in student numbers, or a deliberate decision to move out of a specific curriculum area, should redundancies be considered, and even then redundancy should be a last resort after other options, such as redeployment, have run out.

Workload

Until there are significant changes in the way ALs work, the OU cannot guarantee exactly the same amount of work every year as courses and student numbers change. But there should be a guaranteed minimum workload with guaranteed minimum pay. This may be supplemented by a reasonable amount of extra work as required, but the guaranteed workload should be greater than the extra. A drop in minimum workload should be considered a significant variation in contract, and the OU should make serious efforts to avoid this happening.

There should also be a commitment by faculties to ensure that the work they require of ALs matches the pay. At present, there is no requirement on module teams to ensure that TMAs can be marked within a reasonable time, and faculties need to take responsibility for ensuring that they do not place unreasonable demands on ALs.

Group Sizes

The current system of pay for groups of different sizes is not reasonable, either to the AL or to the university. The fact that ALs get paid 100% of salary for small groups means that the university goes to great lengths to avoid them. Conversely, ALs can be expected to accept 29% extra students for no extra pay. A more equitable system is required, and one that takes into account total workload as well as individual components.

Parity with internal staff

This includes the following three aspects: pay scales, leave and redundancy.

On pay scales, ALs should have the same progression as internal staff at AC2/Grade 7. This has been granted, but the discretionary points at the top of the scale are not currently available to ALs, and this must change before we can say that our 2005 interim agreement with the OU on AL assimilation has been fulfilled.

Internal staff are entitled to total leave of 44 days. This is made up of 8 bank holidays, 3 closure days and 33 days annual leave. ALs get 8 bank holidays and 20 days annual leave. This is a clear inequity, and should change. The clause in the AL contract that effectively states that leave may only be taken when there is no work to do must also be removed.

The university makes great effort to avoid compulsory redundancies among internal staff, and should make similar efforts for ALs, particularly if they are committing more time to the OU. It should be the norm for ALs to be redeployed, with retraining as necessary.

Current Situation

Considerable progress has been made, but it is very slow. One reason for the slowness is that serious change always takes a long time in the OU. There is particular difficulty over the general question of parity with internal staff. Under current economic conditions we may not get everything straight away, but on the union side we regard it as essential that there should be clear and definable progress.

The negotiating team is also concerned to ensure that the limited employment protection provided by the current AL contract is not lost until an improved system is in place.

The university has stated that it is hoping to implement the new contract in July 2012. The union negotiators would be happy with this date, or an earlier one, but are not prepared to settle for a contract which does not in practice provide the improvements we are looking for.

OU UCU AL Negotiating team

Banners are still bright!

Up to half a million people demonstrated against the Coalition cuts on Saturday March 26th. These are occasions when the wit and rhetoric of masses on the march come to the fore. Solidarity against injustice is vividly expressed through chants and songs, flags and banners (and the hats and costumes of some more flamboyant protestors). On the mass produced and home made placards we see savage and satirical, angry and sad, funny and poignant slogans. We also have huge elaborate banners, weaving together tradition and modernity, but all proclaiming their identity with great skill and artistry. Public protest is where the trade unions and working classes really “flirt their colours.” If you have ever participated in an annual summer Tolpuddle Martyrs’ March or witnessed the parades at the Durham Miners’ Gala then you’ll have some notion about the pictorial and picturesque past and present of women and men in struggle.



Photo from <http://manchestermule.com>

Nowadays and on the national demos, our banners are ever broader in compass and our trades union “flags” celebrate the ethnic and gender diversity of our workforces. A huge array of progressive and agitational groups come together and anti-capitalist sentiment is by no means monopolised by militant trade unionism. We all have a song to sing and a picture to paint. Well, this all sounds very noble and heartening in a world largely characterised by economic and geopolitical crises (a carnival of reaction, to borrow James Connolly’s phrase) but we have some way to go towards being a class for itself not simply a class in itself.

And talking about traditions, what can our past history tell us? For some years now I have been researching with an expert art historian, Dr Annie Ravenhill-Johnson, into the art and ideology of Trades Union Emblems (1850-1925.) As a classicist I am intrigued by the appropriation of Greco-Roman figures, motifs and allusions in the elaborate banners and certificates of the Victorian unions which seem on the surface to be promoting a reassuring discourse of shared culture with the ruling classes. **And yet clearly classical imagery helped empower the image of the worker as heroic, as Marx’s “new fangled man for new fangled machinery.”** In 1851 James Sharples (a blacksmith at the Phoenix forge who walked 18 miles from Bury to Manchester for his painting materials) won the award for his design for the certificate of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Machinists, Millwrights, Smiths and Pattern Makers, (itself a painfully and newly forged union) and his artistic foregrounding of the working man on an arched structure was enormously influential on emblem designs.

Annie has now completed all the case study and thematic chapters for our forthcoming book with Anthem Publishing in which she interprets the trends and traditions in these emblems. This is a truly dialectical approach to their history, nature and political context. Even when the mood was militant (for instance the late 19th century Dock Strike Banner with Hercules strangling the serpent of capitalism) the banners would champion the workforce for their contribution to a British Empire which their labour could make as great as Roman rule! And many banners, designed by middle class Royal Academy artists, adopted the vignettes of Friendly Societies and the signs and symbols of Freemasonry. The ennobling spirit of Socialism in emblem iconography could also be a two edged sword. Walter Crane was in the habit of medievalising the toiling masses and sanitising images borrowed from the French revolution, so ideological frameworks could be contradictory and complex.

To cut a very long historical story short, together Annie and I are hoping to change the face of emblem history and bring these **fascinating images of labour to the fore once again, with due deference to John Gorman’s wonderful book of the 1970s, *Banner Bright*.** However, the point of course is not just to interpret the world but to change it! I aim to expand the nature of Classical Reception Studies in the realm of mass culture and Annie with her insights will challenge some long held assumptions about the artistic provenance of labour movement imagery, its meaning and significance. It compels us to ask pertinent questions about **a working class with an imperialised consciousness, which is entitled to ‘elite’ culture but also corrupted by it, and to address the tensions between revolutionary and revisionist ideologies that continue to play out in the trades union movement today.**

Paula James, Senior Lecturer, Classical Studies

Volunteers for the next volume bringing art and the labour movement up to date! Contact me p.james@open.ac.uk

Plain tales from the pickets

As you know, we were on strike on Tuesday 22nd and Thursday 24th of March 2011. Unfortunately, this event seems not to have been reported on the OU intranet, although warnings about it were issued in advance. Because it would seem that we are to be denied the oxygen of publicity within the OU, here are accounts of both days from some of the picketeers. **I know there is no such word as "picketeer" in the dictionary, but it has a certain ring to it!**

On both days we were in place at the East and South Gates and operating by 7.00am. We also picketed the entrance to the South-West car park, and the bridge by the Church into the Linear Park. In addition to many placards on the pickets, **the branch's banner was raised at the East Gate.**

The view from the South Gate on Tuesday:

Traffic was light first thing, but many drivers stopped to receive our leaflets which explained that we were doing this to protect their pensions. However, from about 8.20am there was heavy congestion which stretched back to the H9 Groveway, because so many staff stopped to seek further information on why we were striking. It became clear that those non-union members of staff had not appreciated, or been informed, there really was a serious fundamental disagreement between the management side of USS and the union side.

By about 8.40am, Security staff became anxious about the delays and soon after said that the police had been called. I explained to them and to the charming police officers who eventually arrived after the congestion was gone, that we do not stop vehicles but when a car stops because the driver needs more information we provide it. The constables took our leaflets and read them with interest because, of course, the police are having problems with the public spending cuts.

We conducted ourselves throughout the picket with good humour and courtesy, but were aware that a few drivers were less so, because several vehicles went through the entrance at higher speeds than the 10mph limit, and we felt that was risky. What was really dangerous were the handful of drivers who chose to go through the Exit lane into campus at high speed without regard to the safety of those of us standing on the narrow traffic island between the In and Out lanes. Perhaps these scofflaws did not realise they were on CCTV?

A reporter from BBC Three Counties Radio arrived mid-morning, and interviewed everyone on the picket at the South Gate. We enjoyed the opportunity to state our case to her. Also that morning, Laura Harvey, one of our postgraduate students did video interviews with the picketeers, **and these are to be found on the OU activists' website:** <http://bit.ly/hcgdl>.

The view from the South Gate on Thursday:

Again it was an early start, and traffic was light. Happily, once again, many drivers stopped to take leaflets and get information from us. Traffic was not affected by congestion and we felt that perhaps there were fewer vehicles than there had been on Tuesday. However, as there was congestion at the East Gate, it may be that some drivers had chosen to avoid the South Gate because of the traffic problems they had experienced on Tuesday.

In total we handed out a couple of thousand leaflets each day. On both days we finished at noon, and then met our colleagues from the East Gate for a debriefing over lunch at The Plough in Simpson. However, as the management side of USS has still failed to agree to meet with UCU at ACAS, then there may be further action soon.

John Bennett



Picket line in Cardiff

Two or three of us gathered to picket the office of the Open University in Wales from about 8am until 12.30pm - wet and cold on the Friday, sunny the following Thursday. This was a small band but represents about 12% of the UCU membership at the office. It was a surprisingly pleasant experience - we talked about union membership, pensions and cuts with our UNISON or non-unionised colleagues - an itself an enlightening experience.

Each day one UCU member crossed the picket line, they seemed to feel that strikes and pickets didn't apply to them because they are management. Having said that, and reminding us of the hostilities between pit owners and strikers in past years, the management brought us coffee and croissants, and other colleagues at work looked after us well. Staff at the hostel for the homeless next door one way, and at the Welsh national Unison office on the other side were all interested and supportive - and it was good to have an opportunity to establish common ground with these neighbours. Postal delivery staff had no hesitation about not crossing an official picket line, so no Royal Mail letters or parcels were delivered. We were visited by a full-time official from UCU in Wales, and were also in contact with our colleagues in UCU at Cardiff University.

Hugh Mackay, Staff Tutor



Photo from www.guardian.co.uk/cardiff/2011/mar/24/ucu-strike-wales-cardiff-university-pensions

Picket line in East Grinstead

Picket lines formed outside the Open University building in East Grinstead on Tuesday as staff protested over changes to their pensions. Motorists tooted in support as lecturers and other members of staff from the London Road building took to the street after being told that the Open University's contribution to employee pensions would be cut.

Paula James, a lecturer in classical studies at the university, said: "Our wages have not kept up with inflation and a lot of us see our pensions as something to look forward to and it is an incentive to work hard." The 60-year-old added: "I am at an age now where these changes will not affect me as much as it may affect others. But we are today showing how strong our feelings are against these proposals."

John James, 61 is a part-time lecturer at the university and believes the changes are unnecessary. "The pension scheme we have is in good shape, and it is actually growing," he told the *Courier & Observer*. "Teachers and lecturers will not want to go into education with just the wages — the pension is an incentive to go into this profession."

From the East Grinstead Courier & Observer



Photo from the East Grinstead Courier & Observer: <http://bit.ly/dWOpwU>

Uni staff join national protest over pensions



Photo from MKNEWS 23 March 2011—the picket line at the Open University as UCU members hand out leaflets.

MKNEWS

Staff at two universities took to the picket line yesterday in a row over pensions. The demonstration by the Open University and Cranfield University workers, who are members of the University and College Union (UCU), was part of a national protest against proposed changes to pensions.

Roger Walters, the UCU President of the Open University branch, was among those on strike.

He said: "This strike is absolutely unnecessary. It is down to the employers' stubbornness. They will not sit down and talk with us. We would strongly advise the employers (The Employers Pension Forum) to come back to the negotiating table."

The picket line was held at both entrances to the Open University and the entrance of the Cranfield site from 7.30am. Changes to the pension scheme, which they oppose, include reducing benefits to workers and changing the system for new employees.

(The report above appeared in the MK News on 23rd March 2011, some small inaccuracies have been corrected.)

Picket line in London

In Region 1 we had a very good picket line on both Tuesday 22 March, the London strike day, and Thursday 24 March, the national day. Members turned out at all times to provide a good presence, including early evenings when some tutorials were running, and one colleague joined the union that week so that she could be with us on the Thursday.

We were very fortunate in that we got great backup in the form of coffee and doughnuts and other delicacies, as well as help with chairs, storing our placards etc. from support staff in our region.

Being in Camden Town, and opposite the premises of MTV, we attracted quite a lot of attention from tourists and passing locals and had our photo taken by visiting students from abroad. We also had a visit from local FBU members from the fire station in Kentish Town in their break, and a Unison member from Camden stopped to express support and tell us about their situation, where they are facing 25% cuts in jobs.

In terms of our colleagues, we were not successful in deterring anyone from going in to work, however we did persuade quite a few students that they didn't need to visit the building on those particular days. We also used the occasion to promote the demo on 26 March. The result was that 12 of us met and marched together from Trafalgar Square, and although we did not meet up with the main UCU contingent, it was very pleasant to get to Hyde Park early and hear all the speeches.

A big thank you to all those who joined us on the picket line and on the march.

Helen Peters, London UCU Rep.



Apology

In my article on large groups in the February 2011 edition of Spark, I said that "Increasingly, administrators who know nothing about the ALs personally, and little about their work, are doing group allocation." This was not intended to be offensive to any administrators, but some have taken it that way, and I apologise.

Sue Hawthorne, ALs Officer

CDSA for Associate Lecturers

The Open University at present has or is developing four systems for managing ALs. They are the disciplinary system, the so-called recruitment system, performance review and Career Development and Staff Appraisal (CDSA).

It is rare for ALs to be subject to the disciplinary system, and even rarer for disciplinary actions to be well founded. The system for ALs is very similar to that for full time staff, and is based on UK employment law. Immediate dismissal is only legal in the case of gross misconduct. In cases of inadequate performance there are three stages, and at each stage the AL must be given the opportunity to account for their underperformance and helped to improve. It is only at the third stage that there is any question of dismissal. UCU hope that when the performance review system is fully implemented disciplinary action against ALs will be even more rare, as managers will be forced to produce solid evidence of an AL not performing adequately before commencing disciplinary action. Full details of the disciplinary procedures are available on TutorHome at http://www.open.ac.uk/tutors/employment-info/pages/policy/al_terms_conditions.htm.



I refer to the recruitment system as "so-called" because any reasonable employer understands that an employee is only recruited once. After that s/he works for you. The AL recruitment system is actually a workload management and redundancy system, which the OU has used to shift most of the risks associated with variable student numbers onto ALs. This is not without costs to the university, as it is very expensive to repeatedly interview your own staff. However, I will leave detailed discussion of the recruitment system for another day.

The performance review system is still under development. There are problems with all of the metrics that the OU expects to use for assessing AL performance, but perhaps the worst is DALs (Developing Associate Lecturers through Student feedback). **UCU policy is that student evaluations of teaching can be highly subjective and/or can relate to factors beyond the teacher's control.** They should not be used for assessment of performance. The OU agreed last year that provision would be made to allow ALs to record their own comments on their DALs feedback. This has since been changed to comments on the entire performance record. It is essential that this is implemented, but will not be a sufficient safeguard to make DALs feedback an acceptable input to AL performance data. Use of anonymous comments from students is no better than paying attention to anonymous letters. It is also UCU policy that expectations should be clear at the outset. The OU has said that 80% compliance with guidelines is acceptable performance, and ALs are not expected to turn round every TMA within 14 days or to reply to every email from a student within 3 days. This should be made explicit in CDSA documents.

CDSA is at present being trialled by a sample group of consenting ALs and staff tutors, and will be rolled out to the whole cohort from February 2012. There is a great deal of information on CDSA now available on TutorHome at <http://www.open.ac.uk/tutors/cdsa/index.php>. UCU members were balloted last year on CDSA at the same time as integration to the HE single pay spine, and voted overwhelmingly for acceptance. UCU are generally in favour of CDSA for ALs, as we believe that there are clear benefits; however as usual the devil is in the detail. It is disappointing that some staff tutors have told ALs that CDSA is the same as performance review. It is not. Performance review data can be used as a basis for part of the discussion during CDSA but it is important that ALs do not allow CDSA to descend to nothing more than a nit picking argument about monitoring reports and TMA turnaround. The vast majority of ALs more than meet expectations on performance review metrics and can not be expected to improve year on year. CDSA discussions should focus on longer-term career aims and ambitions and what an AL might need to do to achieve them.

There is a clear linkage between performance data and the disciplinary system, and also between performance review and CDSA. There is no linkage between CDSA and the disciplinary system. If a manager has a problem with any aspect of an AL's performance the first thing that should happen is that the AL should know about it, and all such issues should be raised informally initially. It is not acceptable for a manager to raise issues of underperformance at a CDSA interview in the first instance.

It has been argued that CDSA for ALs is a misnomer, as ALs do not have careers with the OU, but only a series of jobs. However, the AL role review envisioned an expansion of the range of work which ALs might undertake, so the long term future for ALs does allow for career development. CDSA is the first step on that road, and it is important that it is treated as that from the outset.

Sue Hawthorne, ALs Officer

What future for the OU?

It is now clear, following the Browne Review and the announcement last autumn of swingeing cuts in funding in higher education, that the government is in some disarray. The long promised white paper on higher education keeps on being postponed and whilst at the time of writing it is promised for June or July, no one should bet on that.

So what is the future for the OU in the new funding environment? At this stage we can but speculate but it is not good. The OU UCU has organised an open meeting on Wednesday 29th June at 12.30pm in the Berrill Lecture Theatre to discuss this and the main speaker will be Rajay Naik, the OU's Head of Government Relations, who is well placed to give some useful insights as he was a member of the Browne Review.

This meeting will be videoed and then available to watch via the branch website, shortly after the meeting.

Casework training

We held a successful casework training on 17th May and we are running another Casework training session on either 14th, 20th June or 6th July from 10am—4pm. The branch badly needs more Caseworkers and all members are eligible to attend. Please phone 01908 6(53069) or email ucu@open.ac.uk for further information or to book a place. (The training will go ahead on the most popular choice of the 3 dates above.) The training session aims to:

- **increase participants' confidence in undertaking the role of the rep/caseworker;**
- Enable participants to progress cases using preparation, negotiation and planning skills;
- Enable participants to refer cases under the UCU legal scheme.

Objectives

By the end of the session participants will be able to:

- describe the role of the rep/caseworker
- describe the basic principles of employment law
- outline what members can expect from a UCU rep/caseworker
- outline what reps/caseworkers can expect from members seeking support
- describe key techniques that can be used by reps/caseworkers to assess problems
- describe how individual problems can be progressed
- explain how a collaborative approach can be established with members seeking support
- demonstrate interviewing a member
- apply different methods for preparing for meetings with management on individual and collective issues
- identify collective issues emerging from individual problems
- use effective systems to record and store information relating to the representation of members
- describe the UCU legal scheme and make referrals to it
- plan how they will further develop the role and work of reps within the branch.



UCU eServices area for members

The national UCU website now has a secure area where members can go to update their personal information, several members did not receive their ballot papers in time to vote, it could be that UCU has an old home or work address for you. The new eServices area allows members to update their:

- Personal details
- Home address
- Subscription and Direct debit details.



The web address for the new eServices area is: <https://members.ucu.org.uk> and should allow UCU to hold more accurate details on its members. You need to register on the eServices website the first time you use it and you need your UCU membership number to do this. Please email ucu@open.ac.uk if you don't know your membership number.

Branch members' survey

We would like to gather information on current issues that are affecting our members, please would you spare less than 5 minutes to complete our online survey at this address: www.surveymonkey.com/s/OUUCUissues.

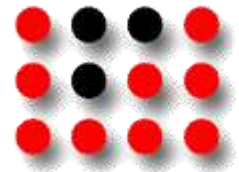
All responses are anonymous and the results will not be shared with anyone other than members of the Branch Executive Committee.



Labour Research Department booklets

We have a collection of booklets published by the Labour Research Department in the OU UCU office, if you would like to borrow one then please contact Deb on 01908 6(53069) or email ucu@open.ac.uk or call into room 015, Wilson C block, Walton Hall. The last few issues are on the following topics:

- | | |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| April 2011 | Safety Reps in Action |
| March 2011 | State benefits and tax credits 2011 |
| February 2011 | TUPE—a guide for trade unionists |
| January 2011 | Case law at work |



Alternatively you can use their online secure area at www.lrd.org.uk and login with these details:

Username	ucu
Password	cbe657

Vacancies in our Branch



Regional/National centres: we are now looking for a UCU rep in South, South West, East of England, North West and North regional/national centres. At the moment, the only duty you would be asked to do is to put up posters/publicity in the centre.

AL Reps Committee: there are AL vacancies in London and Ireland for an AL rep to stand on the AL reps committee.

Walton Hall departmental reps: we are still looking for a UCU member to act as a rep in the following Walton Hall units, the only duty you would be asked to do is to put up posters/publicity in your department:

If you are interested in taking one of these roles, please contact Deb on 01908 6(53069) or email ucu@open.ac.uk

Audit	Human Resources	Research School
Business Development Unit (BDU) & OU Worldwide	Information Office	Secretary's Office
Centre for Inclusion & Curriculum (CIC)	Institute of Educational Technology (IET)	Strategy Office
Communications	Knowledge Media Institute (Kmi)	Student Services
Development Office	Learning, Teaching & Quality (LTQ)	Vice Chancellor's office
Faculty of Science	Library Services	
Finance	Maths, Computing & Technology faculty (MCT)	
Government Relations	Open Broadcasting Unit	

New Officers on OU UCU Exec Committee

We are very pleased to announce that after the call for nominations to fill the vacant posts of Equality Officer and Regional/National Academic-related Staff Officer, we now have two new Officers on the branch Executive Committee.

Jonathan Jewell, an AL in London region is the new Equality Officer.

Hilary Partridge, a Student Services Manager in Manchester is the new Regional/National Academic-related Staff Officer.



March for the alternative

An estimated 400,000 people marched through London on Saturday 26th March 2011 in a TUC organised March for the Alternative to demonstrate that there can and must be an alternative economic policy to the damaging and destructive policy being pursued by the Coalition government.

They came from all parts of the country and many different unions and other organisations, though understandably public sector unions were particularly noticeable, and all generations were there - a number of people commented that they had never before seen so many family groups and children on a political demonstration. A sizeable contingent from UCU took part, many carrying colourful UCU balloons and the OU branch was represented on the march with our branch banner.

The route of the march was from the Embankment to Hyde Park where there was a rally addressed by Ed Milliband and a number of union leaders, but such was the size of the march that many people never got anywhere near Hyde Park. There was an almost carnival atmosphere, helped by a number of bands and the good weather. Whilst there was inevitably some media concentration on the vandalism caused by tiny numbers, most sections of the media could not ignore the fact that the march was overwhelmingly peaceful and reflected the widespread opposition to the policy of the government.



Letters to the Editor

Spark welcomes letters from branch members on any issues likely to be relevant to the branch, please email your letter to ucu@open.ac.uk to appear in the next issue.

Dear Spark

You might have seen a notice regarding the Career development and staff appraisal (CDSA) process. This is to include an 'Activities Review'. However, all the components of the activities review are either inaccurate or misleading.

As a professional statistician, I am particularly exercised by the continued use of DALs. The fact that the response rates are so low (frequently less than 5), and the response pattern is invariably biased, renders these results totally meaningless, and they should be ignored unless a substantial proportion of students (about 90%, as I understand it) have responded. To make this clear, it is not the case that the DALs results give us 'some notion' of student responses. They yield no useful information whatsoever unless nearly all the students respond. They should definitely not be employed in any form of appraisal, and there is a strong case for results not being published at all for very low response rates. In the majority of cases, DALs is worse than useless.

In addition, the TMA monitoring system was not designed for use in assessments. Its use in appraisals is dubious, not least because monitoring is done by ALs or equivalent staff, which amounts to peer review. Unless monitoring is conducted by the course team it lacks appropriate credibility. Assignment monitoring is also notoriously fickle and opinionated. Comments for similar marking styles frequently vary from year to year, and ALs teaching more than one course report vast and inconsistent variations in feedback. In extreme cases ALs are discreetly encouraged by staff tutors to ignore monitoring.

Even the TMA turnaround measures remain inaccurate, making no provision for extensions and individual circumstances (e.g. illness). Their use in assessment encourages bad teaching; it suggests we shouldn't grant extensions unless we can guarantee a 14 day turnaround, but refusing extensions is inconsistent with student retention.

The OU is therefore embarking on a huge appraisal scheme which contains no accurate information at all, and is a complete waste of time and money.

Yours sincerely

Dr. Jon Mulberg, AL Social Sciences

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Your Executive Committee

- President: Roger Walters (r.j.walters)
- Honorary Secretary: Lesley Kane (l.h.kane)
- Honorary Treasurer: David Knowles (d.w.knowles)
- Vice Presidents: Pauline Collins & Bethan Norfor
- Immediate Past President: N/a as Roger Walters
- Equality Officer: Jonathan Jewell
- Central Academic Staff Officer: Sheila Tyler
- Central Academic-Related Staff Officer: Jenny Edwards
- Regional Academic Staff Officer: Judy Ekins
- Regional Academic-Related Staff Officer: Hilary Partridge
- Associate Lecturers Staff Officer: Sue Hawthorne
- Ordinary Members:

John Bennett	Maria McCrea
Chris Bollom	Mike McNulty
Eric Bowers	Philip O'Sullivan
Gill Clough	June Payne
Axel Hagermann	John Peters
Bruce Heil	Peter Piper
John James	Eric Wade
Malcolm Jenner	
- NEC Members:
 - Alan Carr
 - Pauline Collins
 - Lesley Kane
 - Roger Walters
- Father of NUJ Chapel - vacancy

Need help?

One of the most important services provided by UCU is support for individual members experiencing problems in their employment, or with other members of the University. If you want any advice on employment related problems, please email ucu@open.ac.uk.

STOP PRESS: The following resources are available for any member who wants one, please call into room 015, Wilson C block, Walton Hall and collect one or email ucu@open.ac.uk and we will send one to you—it all helps to raise awareness of the Union.



Canvas bag



Mouse mat



UCU mug



A6 notepad



Lanyard



Pens



Publicity posters

Branch & Open meetings

Future scheduled branch meeting dates are as follows:

29th June 2011, 12.30pm in Berrill Lecture Theatre, "What future for the OU?" with main speaker Rajay Naik, OU Head of Government Relations.

27th September 2011, 12.30pm in Library Seminar room 1

22nd November 2011, 12.30pm, AGM in the Berrill Lecture theatre

