



UWE-UCU Branch Update on the potential dispute about COVID-related matters.

UWE-UWE passed a motion at an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) on 14 October 2020. This motion was passed forthwith directly to the Vice-Chancellor and a response was received which has been shared with all members. Another EGM on 21 October 2020 agreed that the response was not yet satisfactory and voted to empower the UWE-UCU Executive Committee to declare a dispute if an unsatisfactory response remained unforthcoming. To check that this position had the support of members, an indicative vote of all members is being undertaken. This vote is NOT about industrial action, (as was misreported on 'Points West' on 27/10/2020), but rather about endorsing the position regarding the power to declare a dispute should it be deemed necessary. Any progress that has been made so far is largely a result of the pressure generated by very well attended EGMs and this vote and we believe that it is only further pressure that will produce further progress towards our position as set out in the motion. Below are the most pertinent parts of the VC response to each point of the motion and UWE-UCU's commentary.

UWE-UCU Branch Motion with commentary.

- **Motion Statements in bold.**

- *Response from Vice-Chancellor Steve West (excerpts). The full responses have already been made available to members.*
- UWE-UCU Commentary

1. No on-campus teaching or student support in 2020/21 other than where there are no other options as identified by the programme team.

“We have said from the outset that we would give all students the opportunity to have some on campus learning. ... We have been clear that the decisions about on campus teaching should be informed by programmatic and pedagogical considerations, as well as the constraints of managing social distancing and flows around campus. ... There has never been any university-wide ‘rule’ about the amount of on campus and off campus teaching. Decisions have been able to be made locally, drawing on programme, practical and pedagogic considerations. ... we would expect that programme teams have combined on campus and off campus student engagement opportunities in ways that approximate to how programmes would have been taught in past years (in terms of ‘contact’ time). To be clear, we expect that students will receive the same levels of teaching time but teaching time does not necessarily mean on campus, in person teaching”.

This statement goes partly towards our position in that it confirms that decisions about the type and quantity of on campus are to be made locally. Our position remains that only non-essential teaching (that which cannot be delivered off-campus) is to be delivered on campus. We will however seek to make progress on reducing the quantity of on campus teaching by working with UWE management to ensure that it is indeed programme teams that are making decisions on what teaching is deliverable on campus rather than being made subject to decisions by departmental or faculty executives that are not based on ‘programmatic and pedagogical considerations’. In particular, we remain opposed to arbitrary decisions to impose levels of on campus teaching such as 12 hours per level per month. We have gained an assurance from the Vice-Chancellor that any concerns raised by programme teams can be referred to Human Resources who will explore the situation and attempt to resolve it. If a resolution does not happen swiftly, we will refer such instances back to the Vice-Chancellor for his direct intervention.

2. The university to follow the advice issued by the SAGE committee regarding university re-opening and teaching.

“We have worked to guidance issued by the Government, PHE, DfE, and UUK to ensure that the university has been able to risk assess and open in a Covid Secure way to support our core business of Teaching, Learning, Research and Enterprise. ... The advice issued by the government and the actions we have taken will be kept under constant review as we operationalise the further return to campus of staff and students”.

UCU both locally and nationally are basing our position on the advice offered by SAGE and by Independent SAGE. The SAGE meeting on 21 September stated that all teaching should be online “unless face-to-face teaching is absolutely essential” and a paper published on 12 October gave a “strong steer towards online learning for all but essential practical activities,” (Morgan, 2020). That paper also identified that keeping university campuses open would add 0.3% to the R-rate. In this context, we remain concerned that a further return of staff and students is envisaged. We can remember all too clearly how the guidance from Public Health England was used to justify holding

the offer holder event on 14 March, just two days before 'lockdown' was announced, when UCU was demanding its cancellation. Rather than being a follower of government policy we want UWE to be taking a lead and basing its practices more closely on the guidance emanating from scientific expertise.

3. Staff must not be compelled to teach on-campus where individual risk classification is C and D.

"Where a personal risk assessment identifies that a member of staff is in category C or D then line managers will engage with them and consider the best ways to mitigate any risk, based on that person's individual circumstances".

The SAGE report published on October 14 identifies that the risks of COVID-related fatalities and serious illness lie more with staff working in HE than amongst the student body. We remain highly concerned about the health and welfare of all of our colleagues but particularly so about that of those with a category C or D assessment which highlights the vulnerability of the colleague and/or a close family member or other loved one. We cannot accept that decisions about a return to campus for people in those groups are to be left to the line manager. This is likely to create significant discrepancies across the University as well as placing those line managers in an extremely difficult and indeed intolerable situation. The lack of a clear statement along the lines of our motion is generating significant uncertainty for our colleagues resulting in yet more stress and strain. The kind thing to do is to offer certainty and security for those colleagues by agreeing to this demand. Doing so will also boost the morale of all staff who, we assert, remain very concerned for the health and welfare of their most vulnerable colleagues.

4. Provision of sufficient and suitable separate break rooms for staff and students obligated to attend on campus.

"The clear requirement to observe 2m social distancing and face coverings inside in all parts of the university allows staff and students to share access to catering and refreshment areas, ... There are dedicated staff areas across all Faculties and campuses but access and availability will be strictly controlled and where needed will be moved to bookable space".

This issue remains unresolved. We are also concerned that the timetabling of classes (six consecutive hours) is leaving colleagues without the opportunity to take a sufficient break or any break at all.

5. Workload recognition, support and training for all staff in online teaching with sufficient and appropriate resources.

"The changes to modes of delivery of teaching and support for learning will, of course, need to be reflected in the workload model going forward. And we will work with colleagues across the faculties to consider how best this is done".

We welcome the commitment to review how to reflect the additional work that colleagues are undertaking in the workload model. This approach needs to be uniform across faculties in order to achieve parity and fairness. This process needs to be undertaken as swiftly as possible so that, if needs be, additional staffing can be procured so that colleagues are not asked to work above their

maximum workload allocation. A clear directive also needs to be given that staff cannot be compelled to work beyond the maximum workload allocation. We know that many colleagues worked extremely hard over the summer and missed out on holiday entitlement and are continuing to do so during the academic year. Consequently, this point remains an important part of this motion and of our ongoing concerns.

6. No job losses for staff, casualised or permanent.

“We have done exceptionally well to secure students in this year’s intake. This significantly strengthens the university’s financial position and we will continue to work hard to maintain that position. In light of this, we can demonstrate that investment is planned to continue into academic, professional and technical posts during the 2020/21 academic year. ... we are monitoring very closely January intake numbers and progression and early drop-out data. It should be stressed that there continues to be significant uncertainty for 2020/21.

We have never been in a position to offer guarantees about job losses and we cannot provide that guarantee now”.

We are supporting the national UCU campaign, ‘Fund the Future’ which argues that COVID has revealed and deepened the crisis of HE produced by the competitive market. This campaign calls for a return of ‘caps’ on university numbers in order to secure the future of all universities. This campaign also calls on all universities to negotiate a ‘Jobs First’ agreement and we will be following suit. As a first step we have analysed UWE’s finances and have concluded that university finances are very healthy and that UWE possesses many viable financial options to ensure the goal of no job losses. Moving forwards, within the confines of nationally negotiated terms and conditions of employment, we remain open to exploring all possible avenues in order to secure the jobs of all members of our university community. Reaching an agreement that secures job security for all while maintaining the health of university finances requires an approach that is open, transparent and generates trust. To this end, we have also requested timely provision of the most up-to-date financial information in order to continue with our own analysis of university finances.

7. University to demand additional government funding to cover any shortfalls and additional costs to protect jobs and the student experience.

“This is not something that is effective or appropriate for one university to do alone. Lobbying government in this way is resource hungry and would be ineffective and counter-productive. We will continue to support Universities UK and the University Alliance group to press for fair and transparent funding settlements ... we are seeing a deteriorating employment market and increasing redundancies in many sectors as organisations fight for survival”.

We are not calling on UWE to make this demand alone. The case for the contribution that universities make to the economy and society, however, can be made locally. This case can be strengthened by enlisting our allies beyond the university including political bodies and representatives as well as business and civil society associations. Within the constraints of our limited resources, UWE-UCU will work with our allies within UWE and beyond to make our case in the public sphere for levels of public funding that can sustain universities and help them to contribute to economic and social recovery and sustainability.

Reference

Morgan, J. (2020) UK government was warned campus Covid outbreaks 'very likely'. *THE online*, 13 October. Accessed 30/10/2020.

Don't forget our UCU@UWE
Meeting

Emergency Members

Wednesday 4 November 2020 3:00 PM

Join Zoom

Meeting <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84250838705?pwd=ajAxVTVvYS9RMXhKSUFUaGkyVHBXZz09>



Make sure you have a look at the national guidance on how to protect yourself and others, including the substantial information available to you via UCU.org.uk:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10739/Covid-19-update-what-is-happening-in-your-workplace>

Branch Reps are on hand to hear your concerns if you have any.

The University is just about to issue guidance on Remote working, but in the meantime we would like to remind you that there is already UCU guidance available: [Working Remotely and Online](#)

Further suggested information sources:

<https://www.independentsage.org/behaviour-group-consultation-statement-on-universities-in-the-context-of-sars-cov-2/>

<https://www.thompsonstradeunion.law/news/news-releases/employment-matters/briefing-on-employer-and-employees-responsibilities-in-the-wake-of-coronavirus-covid-19>

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/coronavirus#my-employer-has-declared-business-as-usual-what-should-i-do>