



# Covid Conversations Response March 2021

Dear Members,

This response is sent as we approach the Easter break, when all of us are looking forward to a much-deserved break from work.

For some members, pressure and worry are starting to ease. The end of block 2 means a reduction in teaching. Most children have had a few weeks back at school. For all of us, - especially those members in vulnerable categories and/or those with loved ones in vulnerable categories - there is some relief that the vaccine is being rolled out. For many of us, the next few weeks signals the opportunity to spend time with family and friends who we have been missing since last year.

And whilst we can be both hopeful and thankful about these developments, unsurprisingly members remain overwhelmingly anxious, angry and agitated about our experiences as workers.

From Reps across the faculties, we hear about unfilled vacancies; increased and 'unbundled' workloads and high levels of staff stress. We hear about demands on staff that undermine their expertise, autonomy and pedagogic practice, inviting lower morale.

From Case Work with individuals, we hear of staff experiencing unfairness, bullying and burnout.

From members meetings, and increasingly, from unprompted emails you are sharing experiences demonstrating unfair, inconsistent and unsustainable management practices across UWE.

Finally, the recent '*quick covid conversations*', have reiterated many of the above concerns, specifically in relation to a) the return to campus and b) workloads. Below is a 'quick-ish' summary of those conversations (whilst we will attach the wider analysis with the next Newsletter, due out end of April).

## What we asked you:

We asked for your thoughts & feelings on a) returning to campus during this academic year, and then b) about workload. We asked because these were key areas of concern that prompted the dispute. As you will know from dispute updates, none of the 7 concerns have been sufficiently addressed by the VC's office. There have been meetings; there has been some acknowledgment; there have been some requests for specific evidence, some invitations to individuals to come forward and speak to their managers.

There has been no meaningful action from the VC's office to resolve this dispute.

## What you told us:

### *In A Quick Covid Conversation A – Returning to Campus...*

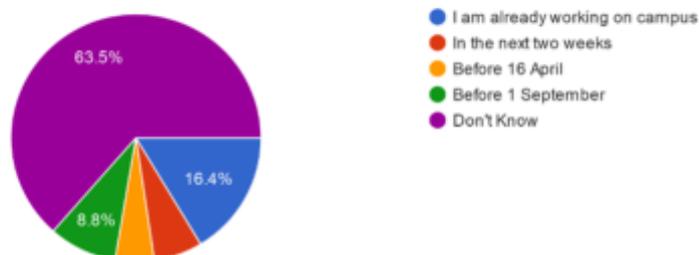
There were 159 responses in three days, with almost everyone adding full, informative and at times distressing detail of their experiences and worries. The analysis will be presented in full later in April, but below is a brief response on key themes.

**Uncertainty** about returning to campus was a dominant theme, closely tied to members feeling **unsupported**. A further theme was in relation to members experiencing **exhaustion**.

Members were alarmed at the messages from UWE suggesting we'd all be getting back to normal from end of March. There is some disconnect between UWE communications and actual agreed plans at member level. Most respondents had no idea when they would be returning.

Responses suggested that members who know their risk category, and have discussed it with their managers are mostly working online, but there is concern about return dates. Most colleagues in category D have discussed their circumstances with their managers and most have no return planned. Two thirds of Category C colleagues have also discussed their circumstances and also have no specific return plan. It is positive that members in category C & D are feeling less pressure to return to campus than they experienced in teaching block 1. UCU continue to push for clear and safe planning across faculties, via the dispute process and of course, through our case-work support to individual members.

When are you scheduled to return to on campus teaching?  
159 responses



Across all respondents, about one fifth are undertaking some on-campus work now, but few were expecting to return before April 16. There was some variation across faculties about current and future plans:

No FBL or service staff reported working on campus at present. This is an improvement from teaching block 1 when staff were being expected to

About 10% of HAS Frenchay members reported working on-campus. Staff are more reassured about safety when in such low numbers, but concerns were raised about how safe a *general* return will be.

About 35% of HAS Glenside members reported working on campus, supporting health care professionals and students, for which we all remain grateful. It was notable how *very* concerned this group is about the risks of students returning en-masse, fearing the likelihood of a local surge.

25% of ACE staff report working onsite. They consider the site management has been ok recently, but concerns about return are expressed. The short notice of practical work restarting was not welcome by members.

38 % of FET staff report on-campus teaching, and report significant discontent about unnecessary on-campus teaching (especially as there has been poor attendance anyway); no consultation; poor management. Responses suggested FET managers were breaching rules.

Generally, members questioned the safety of a return to campus without a review of risk assessments, sufficient vaccination cover and a clearly communicated plan. This uncertainty was compounded by the experience of previous failures of leadership and communication. For example, the initial insistence that staff and students didn't have to wear masks, or the poorly communicated and executed plan around 'minimum on-campus hours'.

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*UCU are working to ensure there is no general return to on campus teaching until it is clearly safe to do so.*

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An equally dominant theme was **exhaustion**. Members report working long hours, over extended periods of time, involving new and un-bundled tasks (more in conversation B). The WAMS system is not reflecting how much more staff are having to do, and **as WAMS doesn't count it, exhaustion doesn't count**.

Members felt strongly about the lack of recognition and reward for this additional work. We know staff have had to carry over leave. Members were particularly angry about a significant increase in non-academic tasks and other unreasonable unrecognised labour demands that have been added to their **actual, lived and worked** workload. UCU are requesting acknowledgment, reparations and repairs for all of these from the University (more in conversation B).

Many members including those with reasonable adjustments validated by Occupational Health, and those with caring responsibilities reported lack of support from management. There are examples of members feeling compelled to work very long hours to protect their colleagues from burnout.

Lack of acknowledgment from UWE management, lack of meaningful consultation and lack of clarity was widely reported. It is fair to say that for most staff (79%), their responses were dominated by worry, mistrust, disappointment and exhaustion.

However, it's important to mention marginal voices. The conversation had a number of respondents (20%) feeling **positive, partially positive or neutral** about the plans to return to campus. There were seven members (5%) who were **wholly positive**. They generally thought on-campus teaching was safely organised, felt supported by their managers and were keen to return.

All others (15%) who showed positive sentiments about returning to campus were conditional upon guarantees of health, safety, manageable workload, programmatic autonomy and good organisational communication. These responses showed some ambivalence, all wanting to return but not at all confident about the management of a return. Finally, a few responses stated compelling arguments for some teaching to continue online, and more over, to consider this as a future iteration of their modules & programmes. Generally, this was from members who worried about their continuing vulnerability in relation to the pandemic, and where they could evidence that this met students needs. It's important to note however, that these responses shared also reflected themes of exhaustion, uncertainty and lack of support.

## A Quick Covid Conversation B – the Workload

We had less responses to conversation B than the first survey, and recognise that this was in part due to hurried planning to get the conversation going. We had some valuable feedback from members about this, and will be mindful in future conversations to facilitate the voice of all members. Nevertheless, the data revealed clear problems with workload and the WAMS system.

80% of respondents stated that they are at or above their WAMS allocation. 45 % reported they were between 90- 100 % of their workload ‘ceiling’, 20% were below this. Leaving a third of participants reporting they were over- bundled on WAMS.

Unsurprisingly, and mirroring themes in 'Covid Conversation A', 84% of respondents also stated that they were working additional hours during the pandemic:

**Table 1 Additional Hours Worked per week because of Pandemic**

Hours Added per Week	% of Staff with Pandemic Expanded Workloads
	Total
None	16
5 hours	26
10 hours	40
15 hours	11
20+ hours	7
	100

Members identified acute areas of ‘Unbundled Additional Work’ and/or ‘Missing Bundles’ relating to the pandemic, in particular:

Delivering and supporting Block 0 (examples given of up to 50 unrecognised hours);
Adapting timetables, materials & platforms for online delivery, inc recording & editing of lectures;
Training, professional development & team support tasks related to online delivery;
Responding to students: running additional sessions, or plugging the related knowledge, administrative, pastoral and wellbeing gaps created either by the pandemic or by departmental reduction in formal teaching sessions.

Despite finding that 80% of respondents are **at, or above their WAMS ceiling**, members reported that many substantial tasks remain unrecorded on their WAMS. **So, even without adding up all the unrecorded tasks they do, they are still over their WAMS!** Examples included additional on-campus teaching on top of planned delivery; additional lectures; covering marking for colleagues. Some reported whole modules missing from their WAMS, both UG and CPD modules.

Even where most tasks were recorded and WAMS updated, members reported frequent inaccuracies. Particular errors related to student numbers. Some cohorts have higher numbers than recorded in the initial WAMS and members are therefore not afforded full bundles for this.

Finally, a frequent underlying theme is that the workload allocated via WAMS bears little resemblance to the labour involved in achieving the task. This appeared to be a fairly general experience. Specific examples showed staff leading year long project area’s (with substantial, ongoing input needed) for as little as 15 bundles, whilst staff in part-time roles reported still having to work 6 or 7 days a week to keep up with new tasks. Even more worrying are reports of bundle - shaving - with members get less bundles for the same task than their colleagues, or than they received last year.

Ironically, a number of members stated that they had inherited a range of additional tasks that were directly related to poor communication and mis-management during pandemic, again, a themes that was noted in 'Covid Conversation A;' e.g. re-doing timetables, managing student expectations etc.

Sadly, work being unrecognised by WAMS is not a new thing, but a chronic feature of WAMS and its implementation at UWE. The quick conversation echoed previous complaints about those tasks most frequently not included in WAMS, and about disparities across faculties and programmes. Now it includes new layers of covid-related extras. These were:

<b>Administration &amp; management:</b> tasks like 'my engagement, learning gain & conversion activity; recruiting, supporting & coaching new staff, additional student recruitment; and on top of this, new layers of admin that previously would have been undertaken by professional services, e.g. further timetable & assessment changes.
<b>Engagement events &amp; marketing activities:</b> Open & offer holder days, field specific events, marketing tasks and attending or running extra events like Feel Good February, International Woman's Day etc.
<b>Research:</b> on top of key research & publishing activities, members cited numerous additional tasks: grant writing, roles within research groups, ethics scrutiny, peer reviews, student references, research, policy debates, seminars, mentoring academics internationally, co-editing special issues, interviewing, assessment & research supervisor roles.

Therefore, a significant proportion of faculty demands are not related to direct teaching and remain unrecognised as workload. Scholarly activity may cover some research activities; bundles for Academic Engagement and Academic Administration may cover some tasks on a 'normal' year. However, a significant amount of what academic staff do (and have been doing this year) is still unrecognised by UWE and has simply been absorbed by staff, with some resulting impairment in their wellbeing and resilience. This is not ethical or sustainable. Many members were particularly deflated and angry that this was not acknowledged in the internal communication from the Deputy VC earlier this month. We are exhausted, but are expected to be more agile and dynamic than before.

The workload model at UWE is broken. It is not used appropriately as a planning tool, it fails to record bundled workload accurately. It does not recognise a vast body of work undertaken by staff, and takes no account of the effect of the pandemic. Planning and communication of workload is not working well. Few staff have planning meetings in April or May (only 17%) and most workloads are changed during the year, often without notice.

It is unsurprising that over 80% of respondents do not believe that their workload allocation is a fair representation of the work that they do.

## What do we need to do about this:

UCU remain in dispute with UWE management, and this conversation will support negotiations about returning to campus and the current workload.

UCU demand that WAMS is made **transparent** to staff in general, and have already been pushing to have 20/21 workload reviewed so that it reflects staff labour accurately.

On the basis of a clearly recorded workload undertaken, we reiterate our demand that staff should be compensated for additional work undertaken, and that additional staffing is procured to relieve ongoing pressure for the remainder of the academic year and into next.

We recognise that many members, especially newer members are unfamiliar with, WAMs and/ or lack confidence in negotiating workload. UCU will support members by running 'WAMS Translation

workshops' during April & May, the first is scheduled as a drop in for April 7th at 2 pm. We shall develop a FAQ's on workload and support members who are negotiating their workload with their managers.

Individual members can then enter into workload conversations with their manager knowledgeable and confident about their capacity. Ask for clarity on your workload; take copies of it each time it is published; say no to over-bundling. Ensure you have a meeting with your line manager on the first week after the Easter break. If we all do this, it will send a clear message that things have to change.

Individual members can discuss workload with their colleagues and at team meetings to support each other and identify under-resourcing. Your Rep's can support and advise you on this.

UCU will continue its formal demand that the workload model is reviewed and that this includes wide and meaningful consultation with members and wider staff.

## In conclusion

Thanks again to members for their contribution to quick conversations so far. This is not the end of the conversation, and it is important that we continue to work together on this.

UCU will continue to communicate our concerns to the senior management team. Reps will continue to address concerns at faculty level; case workers will continue to support members who require it.

We all want the same thing. We want to deliver high quality teaching, we want to engage in meaningful research with impact, we want to have a sustainable workforce, we want students to have an enjoyable, challenging, life changing and satisfying experience at UWE. It is in all our interests that staff are listened to and demonstrably valued to sustain UWE as a thriving choice for higher education..

But it is unlikely that UWE can bounce back from the pandemic with an exhausted, undervalued and uncertain workforce. We must make staff recognition, well-being, security, autonomy, morale and capacity at the centre of any 'return to normal'.

The challenge for us all at UCU-UWE is for UWE's layers of management to work with us to recognise and address these genuine concerns. UWE's senior management must provide the correct resources and ensure that staff are not so dreadfully over-worked.

Working together, we hope to reach a negotiated settlement of the dispute, and avoid unnecessary escalation.