

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Minutes of the UCU JNC Meeting held on Monday 2 June 2025 at 10.00am (via Microsoft Teams)

Present:

Damian McAlister
Paul Seawright
Mark Latuske
Paul Davidson
Alex Owen
Fiona Wills
Joanne Doherty
Tina Gallagher
Mark Bailey (UCU)
Linda Moore (UCU)
Paddy Mackel (UCU)
Aisling O'Beirn (UCU)

In Attendance:

Colette Murphy
Alex Owen
Gillian Hinds

Apologies:

Mary Hannon-Fletcher
Norman Hagan (UCU)
Ricky Mitchell (UCU)

25.12 Welcome and Apologies

The Chief People Officer welcomed those in attendance and noted apologies.

25.13 Minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2025

Minute 25.07: UCU requested that the minute should record that e-tutors have the right to join UCU.

Minute 25.10: UCU requested the wording be changed. The issue raised was not only Irish language studies, but the importance of normalising use of the Irish language.

25.14 Matters arising from the minutes of 12 February 2025

UCU requested updates on e-tutors and the Pearson contract. The Deputy Vice Chancellor confirmed the end of the Pearson contract and the standing down of some programmes while options are being considered.

UCU voiced concerns about the implications for anti-casualisation and the potential risk to e tutor jobs, requesting a breakdown of figures. The Chief People Officer stated that a further update will be provided at a future meeting.

25.15 Teaching and Learning: 2025/26 Module and Programme Handbook Templates

The Dean of Learning Enhancement provided an update on the Standardised Institutional Programme and Module Handbook Templates.

In response to staff feedback, the release of the institutional handbook templates has been brought forward to aid staff preparation for the forthcoming academic year. Also, an added assurance layer has been introduced into the review process with the handbooks going to the AQSE operational meetings ensuring any changes in policies have been captured. The Programme Handbook will be signed off by ASQEC going forward.

Some minor edits have also been made to the Programme Handbook including institutional section updates from Blackboard Learn, SEAtS, Student Wellbeing, Student Success, and Employability and Graduate Futures.

The handbook also includes new guidance on the use of Generative AI in programme delivery and assessment; updates on student attendance tracking and SEAtS integration; updated Studiosity information.

A number of revisions were recommended for the Module Handbook related to institutional systems and policy around using Blackboard Learn, Generative AI, Library Services, Student Blackboard Support Wiki, IT Support, the SEAtS app, Seminars and Attendance, and Student Wellbeing Partners. The team welcome feedback on the handbooks. They have had 24000 hits on the website, indicating that staff and students are finding it useful.

UCU asked that workload implications arising from updating Programme Handbooks was noted for the Academic Workload Allocation Framework negotiations. UCU's response to the new Module Handbook format was that it does not allow for academic input in presentation and content.

The Deputy Vice Chancellor agreed that so long as the required information is included, staff should be able to include visual material in module handbooks and that the template should allow for creative content.

UCU voiced their concerns about the use of AI, the gap between policy and practice, and its impact on the environment. Members are finding that students are not declaring their use of AI. They would appreciate more guidance on the use of AI.

The Dean of Learning Enhancement advised UCU that there is an AI working group which is currently being led by the Head of the Office for Digital Learning.

25.16 Update on University Finances

The Chief People Officer gave an update on the Vice Chancellor's joint letter to the Assembly. The University is still reflecting on the Ministerial decision that there will be no inflationary increase in fee levels for HE within NI, and are currently looking at alternative sources of income with active consideration being given to how to move forward and control costs at the same time. The Chief People Officer suggested that the recent changes in immigration regulations in the UK have added to the financial challenge.

The Deputy Vice Chancellor commented that it is necessary to keep working to find a solution to this problem and invest in areas that will deliver an income.

UCU expressed their disappointment about the decision to close the Riverside Theatre and asked that options are explored to avoid closure.

In terms of the current financial situation in the Higher Education sector, UCU would like to see the government welcoming international students and their families. UCU would also like to see the introduction of a Business Education Tax so that employers would help pay for Higher Education. UCU informed the Committee that nationally the Union is asking every institution for a guarantee of no redundancies for the next two years. The Chief People Officer noted UCU's request for such a guarantee.

25.17 New approach to the School Leadership Structure

The employer side advised UCU of its plans to increase the leadership capacity in Schools through the creation of new roles.

The Deputy Vice Chancellor reported that during a recent Heads of School Forum, colleagues discussed the effectiveness of their roles and current challenges facing them, particularly in implementing the DAR process. Through consulting with the Heads of School it became apparent that they want to continue carrying out DARs as this is a way to have meaningful conversations concerning workload, appraisal, and professional development. However, this is challenging for Heads of School due to the number of staff, particularly in larger Schools.

The DVC reported that the University has decided to create the role of Learning and Teaching Director, similar to the Research Director role. A new role, Deputy Head of School, would also be created. These two new roles will replace the Associate Heads of School. This new structure would support schools to better deliver their core business. Existing Associate Heads of School will be given the opportunity to assimilate into one of the two new roles.

UCU asked if Deputy Heads of School would have any line management responsibilities. The Deputy Vice Chancellor responded that the Heads of School wished to retain line management of academic staff. Technical staff could possibly move under the line management of Deputy Heads of School, but this would need further discussion.

In response to a UCU query it was noted that the net costs to the institution have been estimated at £147,000.

The employer side agreed to send UCU a paper detailing the new posts and also agreed to UCU's request for a follow up meeting specifically on the issue.

25.18 Discussion on SEAtS Attendance Monitoring

UCU informed the Committee that the SEAtS attendance monitoring system is not working well. They reported that it is causing some staff to feel stressed, and some are worried that it is placing them under surveillance.

The Deputy Vice Chancellor reassured UCU that SEAtS was introduced to monitor room usage and availability and not to monitor staff carrying out their work. He confirmed that SEAtS is working, however there is currently a slight misalignment between the system and the timetable due to incorrect data in Publish filtering through to SEAtS. This is creating some difficulties in teaching room allocation. The team is working to resolve this issue. Noting that the cultural process of what these new technologies are seeking to achieve may take time to 'bed in', the Deputy Vice Chancellor asked that staff give it time and expressed his gratitude for their patience.

25.19 Valuing Voices: Discussion on professional services related matters

UCU reported that they have received complaints from some members concerning a requirement to work on campus three days per week rather than their usual two days per week.

The Chief People Officer explained that the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework, is due for review. He clarified that the contractual place of work for employees is on campus. Under the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework, 'on campus' days should be agreed locally within teams, with the line manager ultimately deciding what is best for the team.

UCU stated that they were concerned about the impact that an increase in 'on campus' days would have on domestic arrangements. UCU added that their view is that current ways of implementing the Framework work well for staff and are concerned if this is changing in some areas.

The Chief People Officer explained that if someone finds that a team-based change does not suit their domestic circumstances, they should discuss this matter with their line manager to determine if a compromise is possible.

The CPO advised that the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework makes provision for 'non-contractual' changes to working arrangements. If an employee wishes to request a 'contractual' change they can do so through the Work life Balance Policy.

The employer (CPO) and UCU agreed that it would be helpful to identify areas where issues have arisen and discuss the impact of any changes that have been introduced in local areas.

25.20 Update on current academic and academic-related negotiations

The Director of People and Culture reported on progress with four ongoing negotiations as follows.

- The negotiations on the Academic Workload Allocation Framework are ongoing. The current 2013 Workload Allocation Framework will remain in place for the academic year 2025-6. The negotiating teams aim to complete the negotiation by Christmas 2025, and any new arrangements will be available for the 2026-7 planning cycle.
- The negotiations on the Academic Promotions Scheme ended without agreement. UCU expressed their disappointment that the negotiations had ended without agreement. UCU advised that they remain open to further meetings on the issue of civic contribution. The employer-side agreed to share a copy of the final version when ready.
- The negotiations on the Disciplinary Procedures are progressing well with agreement reached on many issues. Once these negotiations have concluded, negotiations will commence on the Capability Procedure.
- The negotiations on the Professorial Progression Scheme have commenced. The early stages of the negotiations have focused on the structure of the document.

25.21 Discussion on the structure and frequency of UCU JNC meetings for the next academic year

It was noted that UCU had previously suggested that the structure and frequency of future JNC meetings should be revisited. The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) suggested having future JNCs in two parts, the first part to discuss a pre-agreed theme, and the second part to engage in more reactive issues. There was discussion with points in favour and possible issues being raised by both teams. Both sides agreed to consider the idea.

25.22 AOB

UCU requested further discussion on the University's financial position. The Chief People Officer responded that this is a matter for the JUCNC.

Meeting ended 12:09