

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Minutes of the UCU JNC Meeting held on 15 February 2024 at 2pm via Microsoft Teams

Present:

Damian McAlister
Paul Davidson
Mary Hannon-Fletcher
Fiona Wills
Tina Gallagher
Paddy Mackel (UCU)
Linda Moore (UCU)
Norman Hagan (UCU)
Damian Gallagher (UCU)

In Attendance:

Rhona Reid (People and Culture)

Apologies:

Mark Latuske
Aisling O'Beirn (UCU)
Stephen Baker (UCU)

24.01 Welcome and Apologies

The Chief People Officer welcomed everyone to the meeting and gave apologies for the Director of Employee Experience, Aisling O'Beirn, and Stephen Baker.

24.02 Minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2023

UCU requested that the wording in the unconfirmed minutes are changed as follows:

Minute 23.23 Point (iv) UCU Facilities Time: 'Work is being shared on a collaborative basis. Dr Moore suggested that this might represent a more feminist way of working'.

Minute 23.24 Athena Swan Update: 'UCU welcomed the clear progress made in relation to academic staff and asked for information regarding professional services, technical and operational staff with specificity for access to promotion for this category of staff'.

24.03 Matters arising from the Minutes of 8 November 2023

The following matters arising were discussed:

Facilities time for UCU:

UCU stated that it is proving quite difficult to take time off to deal with some trade union matters.

The management side offered to set time aside to meet with both unions to discuss this concern and find a better way of managing facilities time.

Academic-Related Career Progression

UCU sought an update on the outcome of the SPG bid to recruit a new role to deal with academic-related career progression.

The management side responded that interviews are taking place to fill this role. It is a pivotal role that will help to give staff the best opportunities for career progression.

Valuing Voices

UCU reported that they were glad to see the response figures for the Valuing Voices Survey and recorded their thanks to the Valuing Voices Team for their flexibility and engagement with trade union representatives.

Key areas of concern noted by UCU for academic staff are workload and stress. They also noted that the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework seems to be benefitting professional services staff.

The management side reported that around 4800 comments were presented to the Valuing Voices team who are currently analysing this data to assess key themes and outcomes. 37% of academic staff participated in survey and this has rendered sufficient data to enable the team to look in detail at the issues affecting academic staff specifically.

Workload and wellbeing are the key themes that management has picked out from the data and is intent on addressing. Pulse surveys could be used to look at wellbeing matters in more detail so that appropriate action can be taken. The Academic Workload Allocations Model is currently under review and engagement with UCU is underway in this regard.

UCU stated that their position is that the University is not doing enough to deal with the serious risk of stress to people's health and requested that immediate action is taken.

Management noted the feedback from technicians which emerged from the survey and hope that the Technician Commitment will help to address the current perception of their value within the institution.

Management pointed out that while there are a number of themes that need to be looked at by SLT, there are other matters that should be considered at a local level. Using the Valuing Voices data, it is possible to drill down to team level and get a good sense of where there is a need for focus. The survey results will help to shape the people agenda which in turn will benefit the University's REF assessment in 2029.

There are three themes that require focus: 'systems', 'processes', and 'people', with 'people' being the most important. Work that is already in progress in Student Administration has shown that if change is approached positively and those staff affected are engaged in helping to write operational plans and setting their own direction around objectives, staff will feel more engaged and happier at work. There is a

Change Programme ongoing in Library Services at present and it is hoped that this approach will be successful.

It was noted that the requirement to complete the survey section covering Section 75 data was not mandatory for survey participants.

24.04 Update on the Workplace Agreement

The CPO thanked UCU for their comment on X (formerly Twitter) which recognised the work of Ulster University's management team and UCU collectively on the Workplace Agreement that is in place for fixed term contract and contract research staff.

Since the last report in October 2023, no further Contract Research Staff have been offered permanency, however 12 staff who were on other types of fixed term contract were offered permanency. Not all offers were accepted.

The total numbers offered permanency to date as a result of the Workplace Agreements are:

Contract Research Staff – 19 have been offered permanency.

For other Fixed Term Contract staff – 96 staff have been offered permanency

The University is continuously implementing, monitoring and evaluating the Workplace Agreement and bi-monthly meetings with Trade Unions continue to take place.

24.05 Negotiating Protocols

This item was introduced by management and relates specifically to the negotiations on hourly paid staff. Management noted that the negotiations were conducted in a positive and constructive manner. Both sides had negotiated in good faith and had shown a willingness to make appropriate compromises. At the final negotiation meeting both sides indicated that they felt that we were close to reaching an agreement. Management sent a draft workplace agreement to UCU in an attempt to document the agreement.

The UCU negotiating team consulted with its Branch Committee and provided management with a written response to the draft workplace agreement. Management were concerned that the response appeared to reopen issues that were resolved during the negotiations.

A helpful discussion followed in relation to the need for clarity on negotiating mandates.

Both sides are confident that the negotiations will continue in a positive and constructive manner.

24.06 Review of Disciplinary and Bullying and Harassment Policies and Procedures

The CPO requested that negotiating teams are put forward for participation in the review of the Disciplinary and Bullying and Harassment Policies and Procedures. These policies and procedures are due for review, and the preferred approach would be to carry out the review during block periods. Due to exam periods, management would be

willing to enable additional facilities time to ensure that the University's policies are kept up to date on best practice in these areas.

UCU responded that they are keen to start conversations on these policies and will put forward names of volunteers to participate in this negotiation.

UCU asked if the intention is to change the policies or to rework the existing wording.

The CPO responded that it is more likely to be an overhaul, but some elements of existing policies will be retained.

UCU stated that it is their position that there should be a separate policy on sexual misconduct. They also questioned whether a member of UUSU could be part of a panel that has the authority to discipline a member of staff.

The management side clarified that while a member of UUSU may sit on a bullying and harassment panel in the case of a student complaint about a staff member, any decision to discipline a member of staff as a possible outcome of the bullying and harassment procedures would fall within the remit of University's Disciplinary Procedures which would not involve a member of UUSU.

UCU and management agreed that an initial half-day or full day should be set aside to establish the remit of the policy reviews.

24.07 AOB

Academic staffing posts (Faculty of Life and Health Sciences)

UCU reported that applications for some posts in LHS have been knocked back which had resulted in some UCU members reporting that they are experiencing extreme tiredness and stress as a result of this.

The management side offered to arrange a meeting to discuss this matter with the Head of School and possibly the Executive Dean of LHS.

Advertising of academic posts and job descriptions (University-wide)

UCU reported that they have been scanning advertised academic posts and indicating to Partnerships and Services those which appear problematic or inconsistent with the University's normal approach. Issues include job descriptions that include three-semester teaching; evening working; the requirement to take on the role of Course Director from the first day of appointment to the University.

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) advised UCU that an appointment was made in People and Culture to look into these issues, but the person appointed was promoted to a more senior role shortly after joining the University. As soon as the vacant post is filled again, these matters will be dealt with.

Changes to teaching and learning-related working practices

UCU expressed a concern that some systems, for example the monitoring of student attendance, and the requirement to hold fortnightly progress meetings with resit students, are being developed in consultation with Department Faculty Officers,

Course Directors, and School Officers, but without consultation with UCU. UCU believe that workload has increased as a result of the introduction of these new systems.

Also, since the exceptional bonus scheme came to an end in August 2023, while additional staff were recruited to deal with the increase in workload, some staff have since left. UCU stated that this was having an impact on the workload of dissertation supervisors.

The CPO recognised that new systems and processes can have the impact of layering additional work onto workload.

In terms of individual workload issues, there are certain activities that managers will need to do such as the scheduling of activities and the configuration of workflows. While the Heads of School will communicate with staff who might be affected by such matters, the Heads of School do have the entitlement to manage, schedule and look at workflows.

The management side suggested that as some of the matters raised here came to light only two days prior to the meeting, the issues mentioned would be discussed in more detail in a meeting at a later date when all of the facts had been established.

Meeting ended at 15:42