

# ULSTER UNIVERSITY

## Minutes of the UNITE JNC Meeting held on 18 September 2023 at 2pm via Microsoft Teams

### Present:

Damian McAlister  
Mark Latuske  
Fiona Wills  
Tina Gallagher  
Gareth Scott (Unite)  
Richard Young (Unite)  
Judith Hough (Unite)  
Rhonda Black (Unite)

### In Attendance:

Rhona Reid

### Apologies:

Paul Davidson  
Mary Hannon-Fletcher  
Tony Starrs (Unite)  
Paul Agnew (Unite)

### 23.09 Welcome and Apologies

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

### 23.10 Accuracy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2023

The minutes were confirmed as accurate.

### 23.11 Matters arising from the minutes of 22 May 2023

#### 23.08 (i): Request for a review/increase in facilities time for Unite officials:

The CPO clarified that he is open to consider applications for an increase in facilities time for trained trade union officials, subject to financial limitations, if a formal request is submitted. He encouraged more trained Health and Safety officials to come forward because the Health and Safety Committee structure is due to change which may place additional capacity requests on trade union officials.

Unite stated that Health and Safety Representatives are usually released for attendance at committee meetings but release to carry out trade union duties is more challenging for other Unite Representatives. Unite expressed a concern that some managers do not seem to be aware that trade union officials should be released from work to attend trade union committee meetings.

Unite stated that their concern is that their representatives are repeatedly not being given time off to attend to trade union matters. They wish to find a more balanced approach.

The CPO agreed that ways to achieve a better balance should be considered. He pointed out that structural guidelines for managers are not in place to indicate an acceptable amount of time off normal work duties to attend TU meetings or deal with ad hoc member enquiries, and other trade union matters. He recognises that this is something that requires attention.

As a first step, the CPO suggested that Unite should set out their requirements in a formal request based on the current demands Unite are facing and the pattern of work needed to achieve obligations.

#### *23.08 (iii): Trade Union Room in Coleraine:*

Unite notified the Committee that a suitable room in Coleraine has been offered to the trade unions.

### **23.12 Operating Plans**

The Director of Employee Engagement explained that the emerging People Operating Plan is one of 23 operating plans across the University's departments and faculties which form part of an overall programme which focusses on key themes. The central theme is how the University's central strategy, 'People, Place and Partnerships' is going to be delivered. Teams are looking ahead to the next three years to the big projects and big pieces of work that will be delivered. The Vice Chancellor's Office has appointed a team headed by Sandra Pryce which is overseeing the creation of these plans.

There is one exception to this approach - the Research and Impact Strategy - which for external reasons must remain a standalone strategy which aligns with People, Place and Partnerships.

Workshops are ongoing to support operating plan owners. Draft plans will be taken to SLT for review in October.

The approach now is to consider how plans will evolve and change, and how to keep them alive. This ethos is reflected in the draft of the People Operating Plan.

The CPO noted that the 'People' theme is emerging as a key theme in developing operating plans so far. He indicated that there is still much to do in this space such as career planning and succession planning for academic-related posts. Academic staff have clear career pathways. Such matters will be addressed through the Technician Commitment and through the work that Mark's team are delivering such as learning plans.

Unite asked if there are any actual plans to show what this will mean in practice.

The Director of Employee Engagement responded that many of the things being planned are already in train such as a focus on the 'Technician Commitment', 'Valuing Voices',

management development, investment in staff wellbeing through rolling out timely stress assessments. There is still space for these plans to evolve and grow.

Unite as if there are any plans to re-introduce a computer lab for groups to be tutored on IT and software training. Would dedicated time be allocated for staff training?

The Director responded that there are no current plans for this. However, new courses for staff are available through the re-published flipping book which includes some of the training mentioned.

Unite pointed out that clerical and technical staff, particularly older members of staff, feel disadvantaged as they have never received formal IT tuition and have had to pick up skills themselves. Unite commented that staff need dedicated time to attend training and practice their new skills. This would involve a requirement to be released from work for training.

The CPO said that it is concerning to hear that people still do not feel empowered to take time away from their work to attend training. This links to DAR which should pick up on staff training needs and drive the organisation's training plan. If there is a demand for staff to attend more IT training, we can respond to this.

### 23.13 Valuing Voices

The Director of Employee Engagement updated the Committee on the next steps in the Valuing Voices project following the inaugural Oversight Group meeting in August. The second meeting of the Oversight Group will take place in the next few weeks. He offered to set up additional, separate meetings for Unite members of the Oversight Group if necessary.

An 'employee panel' is going to be established to gain different perspectives from colleagues in various roles. Members of the panel will contribute their feedback to the Valuing Voices programme so that it does not rely exclusively on surveys.

A full survey will take place this year in late October/early November. A series of pulse surveys will continue to run thereafter covering specific topics.

Unite requested that all unions are involved in a balanced way in contributing to the full survey as they represent different categories of staff and do not wish to see any staff category alienated from the programme.

The Director said that he plans to meet regularly with Unite and UCU representatives to update on survey development. Unison staff will be included in some capacity through the Valuing Voices campaign.

He added that the approach seeks to reach out and engage with 'hard to reach' staff to hear their voices.

The CPO thanked those involved to date in the 'Valuing Voices' programme for their hard work and revealed that results from the recent pulse survey represent an upward trend in the employee experience across the University. There was a 45% return rate which

provided useful and insightful information which is now being used to drive agendas forward within the institution. Our continued high performance is reflected in our positioning in national university league tables which reflects that we are listening to staff and addressing their needs.

### 23.14 Technicians Commitment

The CPO welcomed Heather Burgess, the technical lead on the 'Technician Commitment'. Heather Burgess represents technicians in Northern Ireland at the Institute of Technical Skills and Strategy (ITSS). Her aim is to help to elevate the voice of technicians on a national and international scale.

The CPO acknowledged the work carried out previously by Brian McAuley in this area. He stated that there are around 150 technicians working across the University. They are some of the most important people involved in the day-to-day operations of the University's academic provision. Their role is integral to what the University does.

The national context of the 'Technician Commitment' focuses on four key themes:

Visibility, Career Development, Recognition, and Sustainability.

This framework aligns with the People, Place, and Partnerships Strategy.

The main focus of feedback received from technicians to date has been the need for support in career development. There is a need to create a talent pipeline for technicians supported by a career path which shows where a career at Ulster University can take them.

Action plan priorities at Ulster will cover the following matters: processes for HEA accreditation; career development; roles in research; internal training plans; exploration of technician apprenticeships; technician networks and events; communications, the profile and visibility of technicians.

SLT has committed an allocation of financial resources to support the implementation of the action plan.

The CPO referred to the necessity for better communication and engagement on the 'Technician Commitment' across the University and he announced that Rhonda Gibson is now supporting the Steering Group in this regard. She has developed a robust engagement and communication plan. He advised that there will be more networking opportunities across the organisation to bring technicians together from across the organisation to showcase the different activities being rolled out locally on different campuses. Work is also ongoing to communicate and promote the value of the work carried out by technicians, for example through Insight interviews and through the power of video and photography.

The ambition is to map developments in this area against the DFE's 10X Economy and Skills Strategy. The CPO acknowledged the contribution that technicians can make in terms of economic growth and added that he was aiming to improve succession

planning and create a continual pathway into technical posts within the University to ensure that a sustainable workforce within the institution is maintained.

Unite welcomed the work being carried out through the 'Technician Commitment' and also the use of Insight articles as a mechanism for changing the attitude of some academic staff who do not see the value of technicians and sometimes exclude them from teaching and instructing but at other times rely on them to fulfil these important functions.

Unite pointed out that there has also been an attitude among more senior academics who do not understand that technicians have very clear roles, that technicians should carry out any type of work that is necessary even though it is not within the scope of their role.

Ms Burgess responded that through the 'Technician Commitment', there is an impetus to change that culture, particularly in relation to recognising the teaching carried out by technicians.

The CPO acknowledged the contribution made by technicians at Ulster and stated that, as an institution, there is a need to start the journey, supported by the financial support of SLT, to ensure that Ulster technicians receive greater recognition and consideration for their career development pathway.

### 23.15 Estates Services DWU: Job Evaluation Process

The People Partnering Manager updated the Committee on work being carried out with the DWU teams in Estates Services to help with their understanding of the job evaluation process and provide clarity in relation to the associated grading of their roles. Job descriptions and evaluation paperwork will be reviewed and co-designed, if necessary, to more accurately reflect the current work that is undertaken. Once the paperwork is agreed, HERA will be used to evaluate the posts.

On completion of this work, there may be a resulting impact on the grades of some of the roles, and there is a possibility that some job titles may need to be changed.

Meetings took place with the DWU teams on each campus and monthly meetings have been arranged with volunteers from each of the teams from each campus to work through the paperwork and agree a submission by job role. It is hoped that the work will be completed by December.

The CPO thanked the People Partnering Manager and Ms Doherty, the Estates management team, and the Estates operatives for their engagement and contribution to this project.

Unite highlighted the importance of using an accurate description of the job detail to input for scoring under the job evaluation scheme and suggested that this is where the focus should be. Unite commented that this is a major issue for some members at the moment. Unite added that this issue can also affect recruitment and retention across the University.

The People Partnering Manager will keep the Committee updated on this work.

### 23.16 Any Other Business

#### *Grade 3 Library Staff Working Patterns:*

Grade 3 Library staff on Belfast Campus have reported to Unite that they have been told that they are on an 'on call' rota on standby at very short notice which means that they could be working from 0900 until 2100 with no monetary compensation. The rota had been published with no staff or union consultation. Unite are concerned that this would restrict family life and would contradict the University's approach to work-life balance. There is a necessity to standardise the way in which staff are remunerated for 'standby' work.

The CPO stated that he was unaware of this issue, and he would look into it as a matter of urgency. He agreed that any change the operating model that requires a change in an employee's working practices should be discussed and consulted with the trade union as their representative body. His understanding is that the system referred to by Unite is technically a 'standby' system rather than an 'on call' rota.

The CPO highlighted the necessity to standardise a payment rate for standby and on-call working, and he would refer this matter to the Deputy Director (Partnerships and Services).

Unite referred to a Library Services management email which stated that Library staff are contracted to work shifts which covers the new work pattern. The concern is that the library management team are confusing different working practices.

Unite added that 'standby' is usually a voluntary commitment while 'on-call' is usually a contractual arrangement. If staff are asked to remain at work after the end of their shift, this would fall under the definition of 'overtime'. The shortness of notice would introduce the entitlement to say 'no' to a request to work longer hours. Unite stated that this matter should have been integrated into the trade union consultation on the restructuring of Library Services.

The CPO committed to looking into this matter urgently and stated that Ms Gallagher would respond to Unite very quickly on his behalf.

#### *Degree Requirement in Job Specifications:*

Unite raised a concern about the requirement for job applicants to have a degree qualification. Unite stated that if staff are expected to have a degree for a vocational subject where a degree is not relevant, this can have a detrimental effect on the career prospects for those who have technical qualifications. This could also have a discriminatory impact on older highly skilled staff who do not have a degree. Unite pointed to instances where employers over-inflate qualification requirements to reduce the selection pool, and this can affect shortlisting.

The CPO made clear that successful job applicants at Ulster are those who perform well at interview and their success is based on merit. The work that the Director of

Employee Engagement is carrying out in relation to career pathways will challenge how personnel specifications are developed. The University recognises the need to develop a talent pipeline. The CPO said that he understood how the requirement to have a degree could be a disincentive to potential applicants. He was clear that success in applying for a role should be based on merit and suitability for the position.

**Meeting ended 16:29**