

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Minutes of the Unite JNC Meeting Held on Thursday 14 March 2024 at 2.00pm (via Microsoft Teams)

Present:

Damian McAlister
Mark Latuske
Paul Davidson
Mary Hannon-Fletcher
Fiona Wills
Gareth Scott (Unite)
Richard Young (Unite)
Judith Hough (Unite)
Tony Starrs (Unite)
Rhonda Black (Unite)
Billy Scampton (Unite)
Gareth Scott (Unite)

Apologies:

Tina Gallagher
Paul Agnew (Unite)

24.01 Welcome

The CPO welcomed everyone to the meeting and passed on apologies on behalf of Tina Gallagher and Paul Agnew.

24.02 Minutes of the meeting held on 18 September 2023

Unite requested changes to the following minutes:

23.08 (i): The term Health and Safety Trade Unions Officials was changed to Health and Safety Trade Union Representatives.

23.11: Unite requested new wording as follows: 'He indicated that there is still much to do in this space such as career planning and succession planning for non-academic and academic-related posts.'

23.13: Unite requested new wording as follows:

'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 do not recognise them for teaching and instructing but at other times rely on them to fulfil these important functions.'

‘Unite pointed out that there has also historically been an attitude among some 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.’

24.03 Matters arising from the Minutes of 18 September 2023

23.14: Unite noted the success of the work undertaken on the DWU job evaluations process commenting that the outcome produced a win-win result for the University and Unite.

23.15: As a follow up to concerns raised by Unite, a meeting has taken place with Unite representatives to discuss library staff work patterns. A shared understanding of the issue raised has been agreed and a communication plan is now being progressed to clarify any misunderstandings.

24.04 Valuing Voices

The Director of Employee Experience delivered a presentation on the outcomes of the Valuing Voices survey. He reported that his team have been socialising the results of the survey with staff. Survey responses indicate a need to engage with staff in order to build their trust in the survey system.

Unite responded that some members were worried that they might be identified through their survey responses. Unite also reported that some members were concerned that no action would be taken as a result of their comments. Unite added that the most important question with any staff survey is the number of people who respond and there is a need to focus on this as well as the survey outcome.

The Director of Employee Experience went on to explain that the results of the survey were measured using a scoring system of 0-10 rather than a colour-coded system. This preference will enable teams to discuss the scores and identify what can be improved. Once actions to address potential areas of improvement have been identified and implemented, the success of those actions results can be tracked and mapped against the survey scores.

Unite responded that they were pleased that the colour-coded method of scoring would not be used. However, their preference was for further analysis of the qualitative survey responses. Unite made clear that the issues raised by members who contributed qualitative comments in the survey should be addressed as they are representative of the views of many other colleagues.

The Director of Employee Experience pointed out that it would not be possible to deal with all qualitative comments. However, the team do want to understand what is not working so that it can be fixed.

The Director of Employee Experience informed the Committee that dashboards showing the survey results were issued to departments in January and informal discussions with Trade Union colleagues were already taking place.

Early actions have already been identified in some areas, and it is anticipated that these actions will contribute to improving scores. Work on these actions will have commenced by the end of May.

The overarching intention is to encourage staff to focus on identifying core meaningful actions. Actions are to be documented, communicated and incorporated into the business of the School or Department and tracked to show any improvements. While no standard template is being used, some local actions could be put forward and incorporated into the overall University action plan. However, the focus should be on the actions themselves rather than on the bureaucracy of working through actions.

In terms of next steps, the Director of Employee Experience announced that in addition to the Valuing Voices Oversight Group, there was to be a launch of an Employee Panel and additional focus groups as an extension of the survey in order to extract further detailed data using qualitative analysis.

Unite acknowledged that they have trade union representatives on the Valuing Voices Oversight Group, however they pointed out that those representatives attend the meetings as individuals, and they do not attend the meetings in their capacity as trade union representatives who represent the collective views of Unite members.

Unite made the point that it is important to listen to the collective views of Unite members at formal negotiation meetings. While informal meetings with trade union members in attendance have been valuable, Unite would like to formalise engagement on Valuing Voices.

The Director of Employee Experience asserted that Valuing Voices is now a standard agenda item at JNC and JUCNC meetings.

Unite requested that the team considered conducting a pulse survey into stress and employee wellbeing based on HSE standards.

The Director of Employee Experience responded that there will be various pulse surveys on really important topics such as stress. However, these will not necessarily be based on the HSE standards. He added that there will be many opportunities to drive the Valuing Voices initiative.

24.05 EDI Matters

Provision of Childcare Support:

The Dean of EDI announced that she is setting up a working group to look into staff and student needs in relation to the provision of childcare facilities. The Dean of EDI wished to invite Unite representatives to join the group.

The Dean of EDI explained that the group is looking into what staff and students need and what the University could provide in terms of childcare support. The group is using 'blue sky thinking' and nothing is off the table at this point in time.

An initial meeting has been held to establish what provisions were offered to staff and students previously at Ulster University. The Dean of EDI acknowledged that the University used to have childcare facilities on both Coleraine and Jordanstown campuses. She informed the Committee that a survey into the provision of childcare support had been carried out pre-Covid and the working group was now in a position to revisit the University's position on this in a post-Covid environment.

The Dean of EDI explained that the Committee would be looking at childcare provision in other universities. The group would also be considering the provision of facilities in the context of space usage and both staff and student needs.

Unite asked whether the intention was to provide creche facilities or financial support for childcare.

The CPO commented that from an Estates Services perspective the University does not have the luxury of space on Belfast and Magee Campuses, so other options are being considered. He added that some people may prefer financial support to pay towards childcare rather than on-campus childcare provision.

The CPO recognised that the previous closure of childcare facilities in Coleraine and Jordanstown had affected staff morale. He hoped that, from an equality perspective, this new initiative could ultimately help to bring more parents into the workforce.

Unite commented that anything that restricts childcare facilities is anecdotally more likely to affect female staff. Childcare costs can also restrict women from returning to the workplace.

Race Equality Charter:

The Dean of EDI informed the Committee that Advance HE's Race Equality Charter has been running for a number of years in the UK. A pilot has been run to trial this initiative at Ulster University as Northern Ireland differs from the rest of the UK in terms of the race demographic in that only 3.5% of the NI population identifies as BAME+.

The Dean of EDI added that a working group which will look at all aspects of the lived Ulster University experience through the lens of race equality. The data on staff and students will be assessed to see where the University sits compared with other HEIs across the UK. The intention is to engage with the Unite, Unison and UCU in discussions on this initiative.

24.06 Issues concerning the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework

Unite was invited to provide feedback and raise any concerns that may have arisen amongst members in relation to the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework to date.

Unite reported that restructuring exercises in some areas appear to have taken precedence over the implementation of the Framework.

The CPO reported that all areas of Student Administration have fully implemented the Hybrid and Flexible Work Framework. There were some associated issues with its

implementation in the School of Engineering at a local level, but these matters related to individual concerns rather than the implementation across the wider School.

With reference to the ongoing transformation and restructuring of Library Services, the Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) clarified that they are at the matching stage in restructuring and are working on recruitment into key areas.

The CPO added that as restructuring occurs, there should be a review of the implementation of the framework. As new posts are filled, there should be a natural re-focus on the implementation of the Framework. The Valuing Voices results were positive in relation to employee satisfaction largely because of the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework.

Unite told the Committee that members have reported that there are some offices within faculties where people are afforded less flexibility than others. According to Unite, 'Business needs' is the reason usually given for refusal to grant flexible working under the Framework. Unite also reported that there have also been occasions when managers have determined working patterns without a team discussion in accordance with the terms of the Framework.

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) advised that, if necessary, a People Partner can provide support in resolving such matters.

Unite also raised a concern that there was inconsistency allowing people to work from home during periods of very bad weather.

24.06 Issues concerning the Bullying and Harassment Policy (Dignity at Work and Study)

Unite was invited to comment on the current Bullying and Harassment Policy (Dignity at Work and Study) which are due to be reviewed in 2024/5. The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) set out that the management side is keen to establish whether the University can improve on its current processes, for example by looking into more innovative practices that would expedite outcomes.

Unite listed a number of matters which should be considered as part of the upcoming review including members' concerns related to the use of social media; a need for 'active bystander' education; a need for formally trained mediators; lengthy procedural timeframes; whether panel recommendations set out in outcome reports are actioned.

Unite commented that it is important that if managers or their staff wish to make a formal complaint, they should feel confident in the process and that any agreed policy and procedure should be followed consistently.

Unite stated that they are actively encouraging members to engage in training so that they can participate as panel members under the terms of the bullying and harassment procedure. Unite made clear that they are not keen on a 'management only' panel. Unite also set out that if a complaint of bullying and/or harassment were upheld by a panel, Unite representatives would not sit on a disciplinary panel. Unite stated that they

were not in favour of the use of an external panel as part of the bullying and/or harassment procedures.

Unite announced the membership of their negotiating team which includes representatives from both branches as follows: Rhonda Black (Coleraine and Derry~Londonderry branch) and Richard Young (Jordanstown and Belfast branch) with Billy Scampton deputising. Unite added that their negotiation team would consult with the Unite equality representative before agreeing to any changes to the existing policy and procedures.

24.07 AOB

No matters were discussed under AOB.

The meeting ended at 16:04.