

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Minutes of the Unite JNC Meeting Minutes Held on 14 March 2025 at 10.00am (via Microsoft Teams)

Present:

Damian McAlister
Paul Davidson
Mary Hannon-Fletcher
Fiona Wills
Joanne Doherty
Gareth Scott (Unite)
Richard Young (Unite)
Judith Hough (Unite)
Rhonda Black (Unite)

Apologies:

Mark Latuske
Tony Starrs (Unite)
Billy Scampton (Unite)
Paul Agnew (Unite)

25.01 Welcome and Apologies

The Chief People Officer welcomed everyone to the meeting and passed on apologies on behalf of Mark Latuske, Tony Starrs, Billy Scampton, and Paul Agnew.

25.02 Minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2024

Minute 24.06: Unite requested that wording used should be changed from 'Dignity at Work and Study Policy and Procedures' to 'Bullying and Harassment Policy (Dignity at Work and Study)'.

25.03 Matters arising from the Minutes of 14 March 2024

Minute 24.05: Unite asked if the union could contribute to a paper containing staff and student feedback on childcare provision. The Dean of EDI agreed to this.

Minute 24.06: Unite queried when a review might be carried out of the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework. The CPO responded that there are a number of ongoing negotiations on other policies and procedures at present which means that a review of the Hybrid and Flexible Working Framework would have to take place at a later date than expected.

Unite responded that some staff were getting more opportunity to avail of the Hybrid and Flexible Framework than others, but they recognise that for some roles it is essential for staff to be on campus.

Unite also pointed to the requirement for an assessment of those staff who need to be on campus during periods of bad weather. From a Health and Safety point of view, not all staff should have to attend in such circumstances unless they are needed.

The CPO responded that as part of the review, multiple views will be gathered from different areas of the University.

25.04 Update on the Magee Taskforce and the current financial operating context for the University

The CPO reported that the Vice Chancellor had delivered campus updates across the University on the current financial operating context for the University along with an update on the work of the Magee Taskforce.

With respect to the Magee Taskforce, the CPO advised the Committee that a final report was published in December. The taskforce has identified that the responsibility to achieve an increase in student numbers in Derry~Londonderry should not lie with Ulster University alone but should be achieved in partnership with multiple stakeholders.

One of the challenges is that the infrastructure within Derry~Londonderry will have to expand to accommodate such an increase in student numbers. For example, there is a shortage of student accommodation in Derry~Londonderry which means that there will be a reliance on private partners and capital investment to achieve this goal. Another challenge is that DfE does not fund our multi-campus model. The government is currently prioritising spending on the NHS which means that DfE will likely suffer a cut to their budget. Even in the event that DfE decides to fund the Magee expansion, they may still make cuts in other areas of the University's funding.

Unite responded that the update from the Vice Chancellor and the presentation delivered by the Chief Strategy and Finance Officer were greatly appreciated. Unite questioned whether it was anticipated that the University would have to make any redundancies as a result of the financial context.

The CPO responded that the University is not planning to cut staff or student numbers. There is a need to insulate the University against such cuts, for example, by growing margin by increase international student numbers through transnational arrangements overseas locations such as Qatar and China and branches in the UK in Manchester and Birmingham and London. There are also some universities in England where they have managed to grow international student numbers in spite of the new visa regulations.

Unite requested that the CPO keeps the trade unions updated on any new developments concerning cuts at Ulster.

The CPO responded that he is committed to keeping the trade unions briefed on the University's financial position.

The CPO informed the Committee that moving forward when a vacancy occurs there will be a requirement to check whether the post is to be replaced, or replaced differently, or not replaced at all. This will not result in staff having to do more work. Work will have to be prioritised or done differently and timescales for delivery may have to be adapted. The CPO added that there is a need to make cost savings without compromising on business delivery and staff wellbeing.

Unite commented that they would not like to see a pause in recruitment for vacant positions as some posts are essential. Unite also pointed out that members would fear that new posts will be created at a cost of losing existing posts.

The CPO responded that the establishment model will remain in place. However, the University needs to focus on recruiting for those posts that are important at this point in time.

25.05 Update on the Technicians' Commitment

The CPO reported that a steering group meeting had taken place during the previous week. The University's action plan is due to be developed and submitted this year as part of the Technicians' Commitment. The CPO acknowledged that this would require ensuring that staff are given time to work on this which may require additional release from their usual duties.

The CPO said that he is keen to gain a clear understanding of staff expectations on career progression and recognition for technical staff.

The CPO announced that two new members of staff have been appointed from People and Culture to work on a Career Progression Pathways project which will give more impetus to this particular commitment.

The CPO informed the Committee that the University has signed up to participate in a national survey of technicians in the higher education sector this autumn which will enable Ulster to benchmark the experience of working as a technician at Ulster against other UK universities. Another important aspect of this is to understand the training needs of technical staff within the institution who number around 200 in total.

Unite commented that technicians are concerned about a lack of training compared with other staff and its impact on their future careers. There is also concern around job evaluations and the compression of the pay spine. With respect to technician engagement in the Technicians' Commitment, Unite will encourage more of their members to become involved in this.

Unite added that in terms of staff expectations around career pathways, in some cases staff do not necessarily expect to jump to higher grades but would simply like to receive recognition for their skills.

The CPO stated that he remains personally committed to the Technicians' Commitment and to ensuring that it delivers the right outcome. He added that work needs to be done

to ensure that clarity is brought to role definitions for technicians, the needs of the organisation in this regard, and career progression pathways for technical staff.

25.06 Discussion on operating arrangements for Unite JNC meetings

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) reflected that it had been challenging to set agendas for three Unite JNC meetings over the past year. There are a variety of reasons for this. For example, many issues for consultation concern both Unite and UCU and are therefore brought to JUCNC meetings. Also, the monthly consultation and negotiation meetings of the joint union policy working group have become an effective mechanism to discuss at pace the development and review of University policies. In addition, separate consultation meetings are ongoing to negotiate more complex policies. Standalone consultation meetings with Unite on single issues sometimes take place so that pressing matters can be dealt with in a timely manner.

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) made clear that the management side remains committed to promoting positive industrial relations and recognises the importance of maintaining the industrial relations machinery (i.e. the committee and meetings structure). He asked for Unite's views on the current operating arrangements.

Unite recognised that a number of issues are dealt with outside Unite JNC meetings and suggested that the number of annual meetings could be dropped to two per academic year for the time being on the basis that both parties can call a meeting of the Unite JNC if needed.

Unite added that from a member's perspective, it is important that there is a formal committee to which matters can be brought. Unite also highlighted the importance of having a JNC committee to discuss matters which affect Unite members. Unite suggested that this matter could be discussed again at the next Unite JNC meeting and they would be happy to drop to two meetings per year in the meantime.

25.07 AOB

No further items were discussed.

The meeting ended at 11:49.