

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Minutes of the Unite JNC Meeting Minutes Held on 6 June 2025 at 10.00am (via Microsoft Teams)

Present:

Paul Davidson
Mark Latuske
Fiona Wills
Joanne Doherty
Rhonda Black (Unite)
Gareth Scott (Unite)
Edward Carlsson Browne (Unite)
Richard Young (Unite)

In Attendance:

Paul Seawright
Alex Owen
Sarah Hudson
Heather Burgess
Gillian Hinds

Apologies:

Damian McAlister
Mary Hannon-Fletcher
Judith Hough
Tony Starrs

25.08 Welcome and Apologies

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) welcomed those in attendance and noted apologies.

25.09 Minutes of the meeting held on 14 March 2025

No changes were requested.

25.10 Matters arising from the minutes of 14 March 2025

Minute 25.04: The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) provided an update on the University's finances. Due to the current financial position, the Vice Chancellor recently wrote to MPs in support of an increase in student fees. The Minister

for the Economy issued a response stating that there would be no increase. A funding letter from the DFE is due in September.

Unite asked if staff would be impacted by this decision. The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) stated that it is too early to judge the situation. He confirmed that the trade unions will be kept up to speed on any developments.

Unite stated that they disagree with the idea of a potential student fee increase, however they understand the situation that the University is in.

Unite informed the Committee that members have raised concerns about rumoured redundancies.

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) reassured Unite that currently there are no plans for any redundancies apart from a very small number of fixed-term contracts which are due to expire. However, the University is not at crisis point, and the trade unions would be consulted if the University ever reached that point. Currently, all efforts are focused on growing income.

25.11 Student Operations – Post-transition and restructure

The Head of Student Operations delivered a presentation setting out ongoing transition arrangements in advance of the launch of Student Administration which will take place in the new academic year. The Student Administration portfolio will include Student Operations, the Compliance Team, and the Timetabling Team including SEAtS. She informed the Committee that Services in Belfast and Coleraine have been amalgamated, and a new Director of Student Operations is now in post.

To support the ongoing transition process, the following actions have been taken:

- All line managers have completed Engage Training.
- A transition group has been set up with membership across all grades.
- Weekly team meetings take place on all campuses and cross-campus, and peer-led meetings have been taking place.
- A forum for grade 4 categories of staff is in the planning stage.
- Personalised training plans have been developed for all team members and training materials are now available on SharePoint to support new team members along with a buddy scheme.
- The Department is working with People Development to establish a Team Charter. They have a new Director who started in April.

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) noted that there has been engagement and involvement with all affected staff throughout the process.

Unite welcomed an end to the uncertainty that has existed in Student Administration for several years.

Hybrid and Flexible Working:

The Head of Student Operations informed the Committee that any legacy hybrid and flexible working arrangements are currently under review and colleagues will be discussed at campus-based team meetings with an aim to meet everyone's needs as far as possible. Currently, all staff can usually avail of homeworking for two days per week, but this is dependent on campus-based activities.

Staff Communications:

The Head of Student Operations advised the Committee that a group has been set up to enhance the cascade of information across the department.

Unite responded that information cascades do not always reach all staff and stressed the importance of having two-way conversations with colleagues so that they can ask questions, raise issues, and engage directly with more senior managers.

The Head of Student Operations agreed that this should be a consultative process.

Unite suggested that it might be helpful to bring in colleagues with expertise in change management to support the process. The Head of Student Operations responded that members of the Organisational Design and Change team have been supporting Student Operations throughout the transition, and they will continue to work closely with individual teams moving forward.

Unite requested that staff are made aware that Unite is involved in the ongoing dialogue surrounding the transition that is taking place in Student Operations

Annual Leave:

In relation to annual leave, the Head of Student Operations reported that staff are able to apply for annual leave throughout the year, however colleagues are asked to avoid applying for leave during Welcome Week, examination periods, and graduations. Also, colleagues are encouraged to take time off to attend medical and other appointments on days when they normally work from home.

Each application is assessed individually. Special leave requirements to accommodate caring responsibilities, weddings, sports day or special family occasions are always accommodated. Some leave requests of 3-4 weeks have been turned down; however, a compromise is always reached. The aim is to achieve a sense of equity within teams. Leave charts are shared which set out the parameters for the maximum number of staff members who can take annual leave at any given time.

Unite asked how this system is negotiated within teams.

The Head of Student Operations responded that teams are encouraged to discuss among themselves how they can work together regarding leave.

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) added that ultimately it is the managers who approve annual leave, but they try to do as much as they can to encourage the team to reach agreement by themselves.

Unite commented that agreement by consensus is good for both employees and the employer if it can be achieved. Unite also acknowledged that if a consensus cannot be reached it is for the manager to decide. Unite added that a transparent rationale behind why decisions are made should be provided.

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) suggested that the transition should present greater windows of opportunity for staff to take annual leave. Unite said that they were pleased to hear that things would improve and questioned how long the transition would affect the current lack of flexibility. The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) indicated that staff should see improvements by next summer when new staff have been fully trained.

The Head of Student Operations added that she anticipates that workload pressures on key members of staff will reduce due to the benefit of having a larger team.

25.12 Technician Commitment: Update on progress of action plan

The Technical Lead for the Technician Commitment provided an update on the completion of the first action plan and self-assessment paperwork, which has been peer-reviewed, and is due to be disseminated to staff.

The Technical Lead for the Technician's Commitment informed the Committee that technicians have been provided with a number of opportunities to engage in CPD training related to learning, teaching, and research. This is in line with the new 'People, Culture and Environment' element of the REF 2029 which now recognises the importance of the work and contribution of those technicians involved in research.

She added that technicians now have the opportunity to apply in their own right for a grant and become a Principal Investigator. She also highlighted that a 'Fair Attribution Policy' ensures that technicians are named on research papers where appropriate.

The Technical Lead for the Technician Commitment reported that Ulster University hosted the first NI Universities Network Conference in collaboration with QUB in December. A key topic was 'The Hidden REF' which aims to make the work of technicians in research more visible.

Representatives from Ulster University will also be in attendance at the first All Ireland Technical Conference which will bring together around 180 technicians from different institutions.

Coffee mornings have recently been held on Belfast and Coleraine campuses with a great turnout. However, the Technical Lead for the Technician Commitment mentioned that some technicians are having difficulties in seeking permission to attend such events.

Technicians are now being provided with opportunities to participate in knowledge exchange and leadership programmes, mentoring and mentee initiatives, and conferences such as the Higher Education Technical Summit in Leicester and the Technical Showcase event at University College London.

Unite enquired about training and career progression opportunities for technical staff. Unite have received feedback from members stating that there are restrictions on career development opportunities which is affecting morale.

Unite were advised that the Technician Commitment Working Group is currently liaising with People and Culture on the development of the Career Pathways project. The Working Group has looked at other institutions to understand how career progression for technical staff is being addressed elsewhere. They have also engaged with the National Technician Development Centre who have created a Development Discovery Tool which enables technical staff to recognise the skills that they currently have, and skills gaps that may need to be filled in order to access the career pathways available to them.

Unite thanked the Technical Lead for the Technician Commitment for attending the meeting and added that technical staff should be encouraged to attend the events mentioned and should be released from their duties in order to do so.

25.13 Career Pathway Project: Further discussion on this project

The Director of Employee Experience notified the Committee that, following an overview of that ways in which other universities are addressing career pathways for non-academic staff, an initial draft document setting out a new approach for Ulster is nearly ready to stress test. The team have explored the concept of 'job families' which would be a means to providing clarity to colleagues about where their current role sits within a particular job family, and how they might progress to other roles within the same job family. It would also enable staff to consider transitioning to other job families that may be of interest to them in order to support their career development.

The Director of Employee Experience informed the Committee that the team is also considering the concept of 'lattice pathways' as an alternative to 'career ladders'. Unite acknowledged that lateral career moves can be beneficial to staff if they would like to change their role and expand on their skillset and experience but do not want to progress into a more senior role. Unite noted the importance of retaining skills and a personal sense of identity within the wider University.

Unite stated that technicians are expected to be highly skilled, however they are not provided with any training by UU and can become de-skilled over time. This can occur in areas where access to machinery that was once shared has been removed. The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) responded that this is an inevitable outcome for those who are working in more specialist roles. He added the DAR system is now supported by a new range training opportunities which have been developed over the past five years with more to come.

25.13 Update on Current Trade Union Negotiations

There are currently four ongoing trade union negotiations, three of which relate to academic staff. The Disciplinary Procedures negotiations which do relate to Unite categories of staff have been progressing with documents now in the initial stages of drafting.

25.14 Discussion on Staff Vacancies and Impact on Workload and Wellbeing of Staff

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) explained that most organisations operate with a vacancy level of around 5-10% due to people leaving for a variety of reasons, and this level is reflected across Unite categories of staff with slightly higher levels at Grade 3. This may be caused by the ongoing restructuring in Sports Services where a number of staff are acting up into more senior roles which is creating gaps at lower levels. These gaps have been temporarily plugged through the use of casual workers.

Unite reported that managers have informed their members that they are unable to fill posts due to budgetary constraints which is creating a fear that workloads will increase. The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) clarified that the figures do not appear to reflect an increase in vacancies at this point in time.

25.15 Discussion on the Structure and Frequency of JNC Meetings for next Academic Year

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) suggested that JNC meetings could be divided into two parts, with a planned theme in the first part, leaving the second part to deal with the more reactive and immediate issues. This would create space for the more strategic discussion.

Unite responded that this approach might provide the opportunity to have more detailed and informed discussions. In terms of the frequency of meetings, Unite would prefer to have 2-3 meetings per year.

25.16 AOB

No further matters were raised.

Meeting ended at 12:03