

# ULSTER UNIVERSITY

## Minutes of the UCU JNC Meeting held on 1 November 2024 at 10am via Microsoft Teams

### Present:

Damian McAlister  
Paul Davidson  
Mary Hannon-Fletcher  
Liam Maguire  
Alex Owen  
Grainne Dooher  
Claire Drummond  
Fiona Wills  
Aisling O'Beirn (UCU)  
Linda Moore (UCU)  
Paddy Mackel (UCU)  
Richard Mitchell (UCU)

### Apologies:

Mark Latuske  
Tina Gallagher  
Norman Hagan (UCU)

### 24.17 Welcome and apologies

The Chief People Officer welcomed all present and noted apologies.

### 24.18 Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 23 May 2024

No changes to the content of the minutes of the previous meeting were requested.

### 24.19 Matters arising from the minutes of Thursday 23 May 2024

*Minute 24.12:* UCU thanked the management side for providing additional facilities time for trade unions. UCU would like to continue the conversation on the format of consultation and negotiation meetings with trade unions.

*Minute 24.13 (i):* UCU wished to record that they came to an agreement with the management side on the pay and pay related issues for hourly paid workers. UCU are awaiting an update on rates of pay for eTutors. Management noted that the review of the current contract is ongoing, and they will follow up with the Deputy Vice Chancellor and get back with information to UCU.

UCU requested an update on work being done on PhD pay. Management noted that the issue of PhD pay is being addressed.

*Minute 24.14:* UCU requested information on how EDI principles would be factored into REF 2029.

*Minute 24.15:* UCU queried how pay and reward for staff who work overseas for Ulster University was managed. The CPO responded that since the last meeting the University has engaged an international payroll provider to handle such matters.

*Valuing Voices:* While no discussion had taken place at the previous UCU JNC meeting, UCU wished to raise some points about Valuing Voices. The CPO advised that the Director of Employee Experience was not present to respond to UCU's comments, however he invited UCU to set out any concerns at the meeting.

UCU wished to understand the process used in the Valuing Voices programme to identify and address matters raised in the survey. UCU informed the Committee that UUBS members had reported that there had been no local follow up to survey feedback.

The CPO responded that a draft report was being prepared for discussion at an upcoming Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meeting. The CPO anticipated that SLT would be pushing for more detailed actions to be put in place to address issues raised in the survey.

## 24.20 Student Wellbeing Issues

UCU raised the following concerns in relation to the implementation of reasonable adjustments for students:

- UCU stated that there is no consistent process to ensure that individual student needs set out in Reasonable Adjustment Recommendations (RARs) are cascaded to academic staff who require the information in order to effectively implement reasonable adjustments.
- UCU expressed concern that individual student needs may not be met because often the RARs seem generic rather than tailored to meet individual student needs.
- UCU are of the view that the responsibility to implement students' reasonable adjustments is having an increasing impact on academic staff workload.

With respect to the apparent similarity between individually tailored reasonable adjustments, the Head of Student Wellbeing responded that reasonable adjustments for students may seem similar, however each student is dealt with individually and each report is tailored to the student's personal needs.

The Head of Student Wellbeing informed the Committee that a new process will be introduced in June 2025 to support the cascade of information related to reasonable adjustments for individual students. The system will be designed to ensure that appropriate information is shared with relevant academic staff. The new system will have a new form, and the process will include reasonable adjustment arrangements for Doctoral College researchers as well as undergraduate and postgraduate students. The new system is being co-designed with professional services and academic staff from

areas in the University where there are high numbers of students with reasonable adjustments.

SharePoint will be used to store live information on students' reasonable adjustments and dedicated nominees from each School will be responsible for ensuring that the information is shared with relevant academic staff so that the reasonable adjustments are implemented. It is expected that the new system will bring about a positive change.

The Head of Student Wellbeing explained that her team are at a very early stage in this project. Under the new system each school will be asked to nominate two staff who will be responsible for RAR administration. UCU noted that there are potential workload issues but welcomed any relief for course directors.

The CPO requested that academic staff receive further communications on this project so that they are aware of new and future processes that may impact their roles and responsibilities.

UCU expressed disappointment about not being consulted on the process to date and requested that a working group be set up to consult on the changes given the impact for workload and working conditions.

UCU reported that members had concerns about cases where student support workers have been contacting academic staff directly about reasonable adjustments on behalf of disabled students, as this is creating additional layers of communication.

The Head of Student Wellbeing responded that student support providers are funded by the DFE and Education Authority. The University works with these bodies on the guidance provided to these workers. At induction, it is made clear that student support workers should not act as intermediaries on behalf of disabled students and there is no requirement for them to be in contact with academic staff. The Head of Student Wellbeing requested that individual cases are reported to Student Wellbeing.

The Head of Student Wellbeing noted that the University has seen a 50% increase in student requests for reasonable adjustments in last 5 years. It is important to recognise that 50% of students who report a disability do not avail of support from student services. Student Wellbeing has issued a series of communications to students with disabilities to encourage them to make use of the services available to them at Ulster.

#### 24.21 Strategic Policy Unit

UCU questioned the use of the Exceptional Talent pool in recent appointments to the newly created Strategic Policy Unit. They also queried the process through which the posts were created.

The Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) advised that the vast majority of positions in the University are filled by conventional recruitment techniques. He advised that the Exceptional Talent Pool has been used on less than 10 occasion in the last 7 years. He further advised that the Exceptional Talent Pool is a robust, objective and systematic selection methodology.

UCU advised the Committee that there had been no trade union consultation on the Exceptional Talent Pool guidance, so in their view this is not an agreed document. They stated that they understood that the process was introduced to facilitate recruitment of international scholars. UCU asked for the minutes to include an extract from the guidance which states that 'it is intended that only truly world class academic colleagues will satisfy the criteria.' They asked whether the creation of the unit and the posts had been equality impact assessed.

The Director advised that Exceptional Talent Pool is a selection methodology or technique rather than a policy, and as such did not require an EQIA. He further noted that as part of the recent press coverage on the appointments to the Strategic Policy Unit, the Equality Commission confirmed that there is no requirement in law to advertise all vacancies.

In response, UCU quoted the Equality Commission statement to the BBC which stated: 'as a matter of good practice, employers should advertise all their job vacancies widely', and while 'failing to advertise job vacancies is not necessarily unlawful' it 'may indicate that the selection process is not promoting equality of opportunity.'

A UCU representative questioned why the appointments came from one particular political party. Other representatives made clear that individuals' party affiliations are not a concern, but that this situation highlights the need for transparency in the process. The CPO responded that people are not appointed by the University because of their political background or party affiliation, but on basis of their talent.

## 24.22 Learning and Teaching update from Academic Quality and Student Experience

UCU advised the Committee that they had raised concerns with management about the guidance issued in relation to academic quality in learning and teaching practices. In response to UCU's concerns, a productive meeting had taken place with management to discuss these matters. Following the meeting, key issues were summarised in an email sent by UCU. UCU had expected to receive a follow up response to the issues raised but this had not been forthcoming, and it appears that the original guidance had again been issued to academic staff.

The CPO reported that the meeting with UCU had been positive and covered wide ranging issues including timetabling, SEAtS, health and wellbeing issues, Workwell assessments as well as the issues raised around the new code of practice. The DVC had written to staff on some of these issues following the meeting, however the CPO apologised on behalf of the University for the failure to respond to UCU's email.

He invited the Dean of Learning Enhancement and the Head of the Centre for Quality Monitoring & Enhancement to discuss in more detail the new code of practice. The Dean of Learning Enhancement reminded the group that the PVC had issued a communication earlier in the year setting out the direction of travel for the year and pointed out that 80% of the detail contained in the communication related to standards that were already in place in the University.

The Head of the Centre for Quality Monitoring & Enhancement explained that a review, which would be carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), was due to take place in the next 18 months. A review of this kind has not taken place since 2010, and Ulster University will be the first institution to undertake the new review mechanism which will test if the University adheres to its quality framework and newly defined code of practice.

The Dean of Learning Enhancement explained that in order to prepare for the review, the University has set up a new Learning Enhancement Directorate to focus on the QAA review process. The Directorate comprises the Centre for Quality Enhancement; the Centre for Digital Learning Enhancement; the Centre for Curriculum Enhancement and Approval; and the Centre for Professional Practice Enhancement.

In order to enhance collaboration with academic and professional services staff, forums and working groups have been set up to co-create and co-design responses to challenges that colleagues may be facing.

The new 'Assessment Code of Practice' is an example of such an initiative. It was initially developed by one of the working groups which comprises representatives from across the institution. Feedback on this Code of Practice was sought from colleagues including Executive Deans and Course Directors who provided further feedback to shape the new code.

The Head of the Centre for Quality Monitoring & Enhancement explained that it is important to align our practices with the new code of practice which means that existing processes must be revisited and where gaps are identified in our current practices, it will be necessary to fill those gaps.

The Dean of Learning Enhancement pointed to a small number of additional issues that have been addressed such as the standardisation of student feedback processes and standardised submission dates and times aimed at benefitting both staff and students.

UCU commented that these fundamental working practices had not yet been brought to the JUCNC and HSW Policy Working Group for discussion, consultation and negotiation. UCU acknowledged that a meeting had taken place with the PVC during the summer, but this was after the guidance had already been developed and, in their view, did not constitute consultation and negotiation on working practices.

UCU asked if implications on workload and health and wellbeing were considered by the working groups in co-designing the codes of practice. UCU added that any changes should also be considered from an equality perspective.

The Dean of Learning Enhancement explained that the refining process involved feedback from multiple colleagues to inform the code of practice. The aim is to achieve excellence in both the student and the staff experience.

UCU asked for the following concerns to be considered in the light of the new code of practice:

- The impact of the new code of practice on workload for staff and in particular for Heads of School and Course Directors.
- Lack of flexibility regarding dissertation submission dates, particularly given that Easter falls at a different time each year.
- The need to re-think the terminology and role of ‘scrutineers’.
- Workload implications of assessment deadlines and 20-day turnaround.
- Consideration for staff: student ratios.
- Consideration for the various ways in which Blackboard can be used depending on the subject being taught.

UCU stated that other issues had also been listed in the email referenced earlier in the meeting.

The CPO acknowledged that it is necessary to reshape how learning and teaching is structured in order to improve the student and staff experience. There will have to be guiding principles on how the University operates in this regard.

#### 24.23 Update on REF 2029 and matters concerning Research and Innovation

The PVC Research announced that bi-annual meetings have now been set up with Research Directors.

A project has been undertaken nationally to understand the indicators of the new section on People, Culture and Environment which counts towards up to 25% of the assessment. As part of this project, several universities including Ulster have been involved in workshops to develop proposals for the assessment framework. The proposals have been published in an interim report and presented to Research England to inform a pilot exercise.

Funding bodies have now advised that volume measures for REF29 will use HESA staff records. The SRR field will be used to calculate REF the volume measures. The REF volume for 2029 will use data from the years 2025-6 and 2026-7.

The PVC Research informed the Committee that the University’s Director of People and Culture (Partnerships and Services) has been appointed to the REF People and Diversity Advisory Panel. The PVC Research also noted that Emeritus Professor Hugh McKenna has been appointed a panel member to the Research Diversity Advisory Panel to look at equitable methods to support diverse forms of research.

Finally, the University has had its best year ever in terms of research grant income at £55 million which is around 50% up on previous years. Work is ongoing to try to improve the return in overheads from research grant income and this is moving from 12% towards 15%. The PVC acknowledged that great work is ongoing in Research and Innovation with positive indicators showing how well the research support services are functioning following the realignment that took place last year.

UCU suggested that a separate subgroup could be formed in 2025 to meet twice a year to discuss matters related to REF2029.

#### 24.24 Update on ongoing negotiations

The CPO informed the Committee of ongoing and upcoming negotiations and thanked the trade unions for agreeing to extra dates for meetings:

Academic Workload Allocations Model;  
Professorial Salary Progression;  
Disciplinary Procedures;  
Academic Promotions Scheme;  
Bullying and Harassment Procedures.

#### 24.25 AOB

It was noted and agreed by both employer and union side that there is often a rush to get through the JNC agenda. Management will revert to UCU with a proposal.

**Meeting ended 12:20**