

Surrey
Branch



Newsletter



University of Surrey Branch & Brexit

The full effect of Brexit on HE is yet to be fully understood, although we are likely to face challenges in the wake of the vote as we benefit from EU grant funding, EU students who choose to study here, along with an international culture that allows us to benefit from a wealth of skills and expertise from around the world.

At Surrey University, the UCU Branch have been in consultation with the two other recognised Campus Trade Unions: Unison and Unite. The three Trade Union Secretaries have requested a joint union delegation to meet with the Vice Chancellor, Professor Max Lu, to seek reassurances for staff on the issue of

Brexit. The UCU Branch will be doing all it can to work towards a fair deal for members. The Branch fully supports our colleagues and members from other countries and fully supports the University in a zero tolerance to any xenophobic or racist behaviour.

This Issue includes:

- **JNCC Meetings: The Voice of UCU**
- **Peer Observation of Teaching**
- **Research Targets and Appraisals**

JNCC Meetings...

The Joint Negotiating and Consultative Committee meetings are a platform for directly influencing University policies and procedures in order to make a positive difference for staff and UCU members. The UCU Branch at Surrey puts forward its position, concerns and recommendations on a wide variety of issues, looking to improve the long term welfare of those affected by proposed changes, and acting as the voice of UCU members. The JNCC consists of the University Senior Management Team and representatives of the three recognised Trade Unions: UCU, Unison and Unite. Here, we report on some important discussions affecting the UCU membership.

Peer Observation of Teaching

The proposal for this scheme was discussed during the April JNCC, and although University managers propose to make peer observation mandatory, UCU commends the general approach planned by the University in that, unlike the controversial MEQ data no “score” will be generated that relates to a fixed appraisal threshold.

We also support that this a true peer scheme rather than an Ofsted model of trained assessors observing other staff, and that people will be able to agree to the pairings, and the session in which the observation will take place. Furthermore, discussion about the observation can remain off record should the member of staff wish, and the only formal requirement is that there should be confirmation that the observation has taken place. Further details about why UCU believe this important can be found on page 4 of this newsletter.

UCU committee members are keen to receive feedback about peer-observation over the coming academic year, and will raise any issues that emerge at further JNCC meetings if necessary.

Workload Planning

Workload Planning was another item on the agenda. Currently departmental administrators are completing a workload planning tool as part of a period of data collection. UCU questioned how extra information which is not included within the standard workload planning tool would be collected. The reply from the Senior Management Team was that individuals would need to individually communicate this extra information to their Head of Department. UCU subsequently requested a copy of the Workload Planning spreadsheet in order to comment further on this issue.

...The Voice of UCU

Fixed-Term and Hourly-Paid Contracts

Where there is a continuous need for a role, and excepting maternity cover, permanent contracts rather than fixed-term contracts should be offered. UCU raised concerns about the increasing use of fixed-term contracts, e.g. for teaching where a course is expected to continue for the long term. UCU at a local and national level takes the casualisation of academic contracts very seriously: the proliferation across the sector of temporary and zero-hour contracts is very damaging to the security of academic staff employment.

Senior managers at the JNCC acknowledged our concerns and a separate meeting was proposed between the University and UCU in order to discuss these concerns further. On the subject of fixed-term contracts, the University stated that such contracts are necessary for legitimate business reasons. The UCU Branch voiced its concerns over the potential misuse of fixed-term contracts, particularly where extensions are repeatedly used instead of staff being offered a secure, permanent contract.

For more information on the issue of casualisation within academia please visit:

<https://ucu.org.uk/stampout>

UCU and Industrial Action

On another note, in the interests of ensuring a fair and democratic process, UCU officials requested that the University withhold strike communications whilst UCU was still balloting over national pay negotiations, as it is the role of UCU itself to communicate direction and advice to members concerning potential industrial action.

If you have any questions regarding JNCC meetings, would like access to JNCC Minutes, or would like to get involved in any way, please do not hesitate to get in contact with us:

Colette Maxfield, UCU Branch Administrator

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Peer Observation of Teaching...

As the University sets an appraisal target of participating in the peer observation exercise, we review what makes a worthwhile peer observation scheme... and what threatens it.

As colleagues may have noted in the recent appraisal documents for the 2016/17 academic year, peer observation of teaching is now a target for academic and teaching staff. Although the final details of the scheme have yet to be revealed, UCU commend a scheme that encompasses the following elements:

- No 'score' is generated that relates to a fixed appraisal threshold or target
- The feedback is confidential: there is no mandatory requirement for any of the feedback generated to be formally recorded or reviewed by a line manager - just that the observation has taken place
- Staff have a say in who observes them, and which session is observed

Scholarly reviews of peer-observation describe well-managed schemes as generating trust and collegiality. The 'ownership' of the peer observation process, including the observee having the power to choose their observer, should be a priority because participants need to be able to take control of a process within which they could otherwise feel threatened.

The element of 'peer' in peer observation cannot be overstated: an essential element of a successful strategy is to maintain an equal power balance. This opens up questions as to the 'pool of observers' proposed by Surrey University; how this will be constructed, who will be included, and how trust and collegiality can be maintained within the peer observation process to maximise its benefits to staff. It would be absurd to implement an activity that purports to improve teaching if people feel under pressure to choose their most successful session in order to get excellent feedback and a score that avoids the risk of failing an appraisal target.

UCU believes that the approach outlined above is crucial to the success of the scheme and have long emphasised that staff development should be at the heart of this practise. The debates surrounding the use of metrics in HE have been brought to the forefront with the publication of the HE Green Paper and the subsequent consultation undertaken on the future TEF. In reference to the Green Paper, UCU's General Secretary Sally Hunt stated:

'Simply finding a few measures to rank teaching will do nothing to improve quality, and we fear that manipulation of statistics may be the name of the game...'

...The Score

The White Paper itself, released earlier this year, sets out the ethos behind the TEF:

'Clearly, good quality teaching makes a difference. But for too long, we have funded teaching on the basis of quantity, not quality. ..Measuring teaching quality is difficult. But it is not impossible... And we recognise that metrics alone cannot tell the whole story.'

The subversion of the focus of module-evaluation questionnaires into a blunt

management tool in recent years calls upon us to be vigilant towards potential future processes. It is essential that we protect the systems and practices that can be used constructively and with a certain degree of flexibility, which contain in-built mechanisms of choice and which are supportive of staff.

The UCU Committee will be interested to hear your views as the scheme begins to be unrolled over the course of the next appraisal year. We will raise any common concerns at future JNCC Meetings.



Bibliography

Carroll, C; O'Loughlin, D. 2014. Peer observation of teaching: enhancing academic engagement for new participants. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, Vol. 51.

Wingrove, D; Clarke, A; Chester, A. 2015. Distributing leadership for sustainable peer feedback on tertiary teaching, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, Vol. 12

Higher Education Green Paper 2015 Fulfilling Our Potential:

<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7399/CBP-7399.pdf>

Higher education: success as a knowledge economy - White Paper 2016:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-white-paper>

Academic Appraisals: 2016-2017

Earlier this year UCU representatives welcomed the invitation from the University Executive Board colleagues to be involved in discussions about the proposed targets for the 2016-17 appraisal round. Surrey UCU members were sent draft appraisal documents and were invited to give feedback via an anonymous survey.

Concerns from UCU members centred on research — although there remains wariness of the bluntness of the MEQ as a tool to measure teaching quality, we welcome that there has been no increase in the MEQ threshold in the appraisal for this year.

A further concern is that targets do not take into account the very different nature of research outputs between academic disciplines. Monographs and single-authored papers (which take longer to produce) are more common in Arts and Humanities and this is not reflected in the targets: a generalisation, of course, but one that highlights the limitations of a blanket target across an institution where people work in very diverse ways. We have also asked for greater clarity about the way in that grant income targets are set, and for transparency and a fair system for appealing decisions to address the subjectivity involved in determining judgement of outputs as 3* or 4* quality.

University managers have suggested that they are keen to move away from recent practices where appraisals have been linked to Capability procedures. Having an appraisal target that is above a minimum expectation is not in itself a problem until targets begin to be treated as thresholds—this is demoralising and demotivating when research funding bodies are cash-strapped; excellent ideas and grant proposals do not always get funding, and research does not always produce findings suitable for publication in the highest rated journals. In this respect UCU requested that the appraisal documentation included a clear statement that there would not be an automatic instigation of disciplinary procedures should someone fail to meet a target, we were encouraged by the agreement of HR to include a statement although unfortunately many members do not feel it provides the reassurance they needed.

We are working towards resolving remaining issues relating to the 2016-2017 appraisal, and will be grateful to the University for keeping UCU involved in further decisions.

As the 2016-2017 appraisal round gets underway, please send any feedback that you think Surrey UCU can address to: cmaxfield@ucu.org.uk

A Guide to Appraisals

With the 2016-2017 appraisal round approaching, please see our advice on appraisal do's and don'ts, and what the policy guidelines state.

- Never sign your appraisal unless you accept and agree what it states
- Once the targets and the appraisal is signed by the appraiser and appraisee, it cannot be amended by the moderator. If this occurs you should raise this issue immediately.
- Targets for teaching should not just look at MEQ scores. Include your own feedback, other teaching duties that you have been involved in, student progression and completion rates. If MEQ scores are low for a particular reason then you should ask for this to be taken into account by the appraiser.
- Targets should be SMART
- The appraisal process should be the initial mechanism to address identified performance issues. The union recommends that those called to an informal capability meeting should ask why performance is not being dealt with through the appraisal process.
- If you are told that you have not met your appraisal targets, ask for written confirmation that all data are accurate, and are reliable measures of your performance.

Join UCU today!

Join UCU now, it takes only 10 minutes online: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/join>

Alternatively you can ring the Membership Team: 0333 207 0719

Non academic staff at University of Surrey could choose to join our sister union UNISON. Academic-related staff may consider joining UCU or Unite – contact a representative to discuss which is most suitable for you.



Unions are effective through the strength of their membership. Members can contribute in ways that suit their personalities, spare time, skills and capabilities. All queries on this subject will be warmly welcomed: cmaxfield@ucu.org.uk

Members in Difficulty

All Branches have a certain amount of casework that they balance with other Union work. 'Casework' is the term used to describe how we represent members on an individual basis. Staff can run into problems for a wide range of reasons, be it that a promotion refusal has not been justified; disciplinary proceedings have been implemented; or a post has been placed at risk of redundancy.

UCU is currently organising in-house training on Casework and is inviting members with an interest to attend free of charge, with no obligations attached.

Please contact Colette Maxfield, UCU Branch Administrator, for information or to express initial interest.

Representation

Please note that you MUST be a member of UCU to gain access to UCU advice and representation.

This is especially important as regards legal services which you are entitled to if you join the union as soon as you enter employment or within 30 days of starting that employment. Otherwise, legal services are only available to you after you have completed 90 days of membership of the union. However, if the dispute that you want to receive legal advice about started before you joined or occurred in the waiting period, you will not normally be eligible for legal services. Please visit the ucu.org.uk for more details.

