

**Surrey
Branch**

UCU
University and College Union

Newsletter



Surrey UCU Snapshot

This has been an exceptionally busy time, so we are taking this opportunity, at the end of Spring, to update everyone on recent news/developments.

The committee has been engaging routinely with the University on many issues, including MEQs, workload, Health & Safety and the plans regarding the return to campus.

Perhaps the most pressing issue that UCU is now having to face concerns recent proposals regarding the USS Pension. See our recent open letter to the Vice-Chancellor pg 2-3.

We have also been pushing for more information on the ongoing 'Strategy Review' (see open letter pg 5-6).

We also have an Equality Rep update (pg 4) as well as our recently submitted @UCUSurrey charter on weekend working (pg 7).

Lots of letters and lots of news. Thank you to all those who attended our joint union meeting Friday 14th May—we will be circulating the relevant meeting content/information to all members, for the benefit of those who couldn't make the date/time.



Surrey UCU Branch

University of Surrey
Guildford GU2 7XH

Professor Max Lu
University of Surrey
Guildford
GU2 7XH

4th May 2021

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

Open Letter from Surrey UCU Committee regarding the USS Pension Scheme

We are aware that on 7 April, UUK launched a consultation of employers which closes on 24 May. UUK is asking employers whether they support proposals for benefit cuts, as a response to the extremely high contribution rates and other demands which USS is making in its 2020 valuation. We understand that both [employers \(UUK\)](#) and UCU agree that the 2020 valuation methodology that USS is using, is flawed, and [UCU is urging UUK](#) to join the union in robustly resisting the USS approach.

The UUK response so far, unfortunately, has been to largely 'recycle' the first proposal that was presented via the ACAS talks when UCU members took strike action in 2018/2019, a proposal which UCU branches decisively rejected

[\[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/9300/Agreement/pdf/UCU_UUK_agreement_at_ACAS_12_March_Final.pdf\]](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/9300/Agreement/pdf/UCU_UUK_agreement_at_ACAS_12_March_Final.pdf). UUK is proposing to:

- lower the salary threshold where defined benefit (DB) accrual stops from £59,883.65 to £40,000
- reduce accrual (and therefore the size of payments in retirement) from 1/75 to 1/85
- impose a CPI indexation cap of 2.5% (removing the protection of benefits against any inflation above that level)
- keep the contribution rate as it is now (9.6% for members, 21.1% for employers).

Just as worrying, we have been informed via national UCU that UUK is also consulting individual employers on options for addressing the high rates of staff opting out of the scheme. UUK's preference seems to be a defined contribution (DC) only option which would be aimed at low paid members of staff, provide no guaranteed retirement income, and almost certainly amount to a very poor pension compared with the defined benefits (DB) which USS members have now.

UCU maintains that:

- the contribution increases proposed by USS for the 2020 valuation are unnecessary. This view is supported by UCU's actuarial advisers, First Actuarial. We understand that UUK and their advisers, Aon, also believe that the rates and other commitments demanded by USS are excessive and

Open Letter from Surrey UCU Committee re USS continued...

unjustified.

-the cuts to defined benefits proposed by UUK are absolutely unacceptable. Even within the current regulatory framework, it should be possible to preserve current defined benefits without an increase in contributions – particularly in contributions for members. This would involve stronger commitments on the part of employers, including not only extra covenant support but potentially also higher employer contributions and/or potentially a willingness to take a bolder public stand against USS and The Pensions Regulator.

In conclusion we seek the following assurance that University of Surrey's response within the current UUK consultation will press for the continuance of defined benefits for all staff, particularly those on lower wages.

In addition, we are requesting written responses to the following questions:

- Will University of Surrey commit to sharing its consultation response?
- In terms of addressing opt-out rates, does University of Surrey endorse the DC option preferred by UUK or an alternative?
- Is University of Surrey willing to pay higher contributions than the current rate?
- Does University of Surrey endorse the benefits cuts proposed by UUK or not?
- Does University of Surrey want UUK to explore conditional indexation with UCU?
- Is University of Surrey willing to provide more covenant support, particularly in the form of a 30 year moratorium on employer exits?
- Would University of Surrey be willing to consider legal action against USS/TPR?

In light of the current UUK consultation timeline, we would appreciate a formal written response before the 12th May. We shall be circulating any response to our members.

Thank you

Kind regards

Surrey UCU Committee

Equality and Diversity Update

University Equality and Diversity Activity

The University has recently published a new [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Plan](#) and a [Race Equality Action Plan](#).

A number of staff networks have been established to support staff from marginalised groups and to work to improve equality and diversity at Surrey – these include:

- Women@Surrey
- Surrey Embracing Ethnic Diversity (SEED)
- Rainbow Network for LGBTQIA staff

There are also plans to create a Disabled Staff Network in the near future. Members interested in being involved in these networks should contact: edi@surrey.ac.uk.

As @UCUSurrey Equalities Rep I attend regular University Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Forum meetings – the next one is in May 2021. Please get in touch if you have an issue that you would like us to raise for discussion at one of these meetings.

UCU Training Opportunities

UCU are creating a number of new training workshops around equality issues which will be available to members over the coming months. These will include:

- Decolonise Your Institution
- Community Accountability for Racial Justice
- LGBT+ Language in Use

We are also able to arrange for UCU trainers to run sessions of these workshops specifically for our branch – if this is something that is of interest please let us know.

Upcoming Events and Networks

LGBT+ liberation in contexts of hostility: Wednesday 12 May, 4.00pm UCU LGBT+ will host an online event about action for LGBT+ liberation ahead of the international day against LGBT+ phobias (IDAHOBIT). There are experiences of anti-LGBT+ feelings at every level, this event looks at actions for support, empowerment, and solidarity.

[The event is on Wednesday 12 May from 4.00pm – 5.30pm, click here to register.](#)

The UCU Equalities Team are also looking to facilitate the development of regional LGBT+ networks – if this is something you would be interested in you can email Seth Atkin (satkin@ucu.org.uk) with your name, institution and location.

Finally, feel free to get in touch with any concerns or questions – we are here to help. If any members are interested in getting more involved in our branch equality work please do get in touch – it would be great to have you on board!

Claire Edwards
@UCUSurrey Equality Rep
Claire.edwards@surrey.ac.uk





Professor Max Lu
University of Surrey
Guildford
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1st March 2021

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

Open Letter from the Campus Trade Unions re 'Strategy Review'

Thank you for your formal response (dated 11th December 2020) to the UCU open letter (dated 26th November 2020). We appreciated the direct communication from the Vice-Chancellor regarding the important issue of staff security.

In terms of the content of the formal response, the three campus trade unions, UCU, UNISON and Unite, continue to have concerns and we are writing to you as a collective to seek reassurances for our respective members. Our concerns relate specifically to the following statement:

'You would appreciate that no organisation can guarantee what the changes will be needed or that there will be no redundancies in the future. However, the strategy refresh process has highlighted the need for University of Surrey to increase the total number of academic staff, in order to stay competitive.'

In addition to the lack of reassurances as to future redundancies, our concerns are as follows:

- 1) This response focuses on academic staff with no mention of the importance of, or planning for, staff providing essential services within the institution (e.g. Professional Services, Technicians, Estates).
- 2) It is unclear from the statement whether the University is planning to increase the number of academic staff in order to provide more courses. If this is the case, and no simultaneous increase in other functions is being considered, staff members within Professional Services/Technical roles will experience a consequent increase in workload and work-related stress.
- 3) Furthermore, while we welcome the recognition that there is a need to "increase the total number of academic staff", this needs to go hand-in-hand with protecting current academics' jobs. Expanding some areas at the expense of others - even if there were to be a net total gain of academic posts - would not be an acceptable strategy, and we need further assurances that this is not what is being considered.
- 4) On a related note, we have become aware that the institution has begun a 'Professional Services Review' but to date the campus trade unions have yet to be in/formally notified. We look forward to

Open Letter from the campus unions re 'Strategy Review' continued...

receiving information on the current thinking behind any such review, plus planned timescales for decisions and subsequent actions involving staff.

As we hope the above points will demonstrate, we believe all staff functions are connected, and deserve parity, within University of Surrey.

In order to understand more fully the remit of the Strategy Review/Refresh, we would like a second formal response which clarifies more precisely the current institutional position. We have identified the following options:

- 1) The Strategy Review/Refresh does not encompass plans for compulsory redundancies
- 2) If there are to be redundancies, the university will offer a generous institution-wide voluntary severance scheme in the first instance
- 3) No redundancies will be made based on cost savings unless and until they are subject to full transparent audit of any financial justification, including alternative savings and measures scrutinised by UCU finance experts
- 4) No compulsory redundancies are to be considered until student numbers for 2021-2022 are known
- 5) Compulsory redundancies are only being considered in specific areas, not part of a University wide programme (please detail/list specific areas)
- 6) We cannot confirm or commit to any of the above as there is no formulated institutional plan.

Please could you clarify which option/s are closest to representing the Executive Board's current thinking?

To summarise our joint campus trade union position, we are aware that student numbers have not been as badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic as originally predicted, and that we are yet to see any granular financial evidence that would justify the need for redundancy planning. In addition to this, any cost saving exercises that were proven to be necessary, should be made by focussing on non-staff costs (e.g. reviewing the cost of consultants and institutional software).

We look forward to your further response and clarifications.

Kind regards

Surrey UCU, Unite, UNISON

UCU Surrey Charter for the Staffing and Delivery of Open Days

In recent years, the University of Surrey has introduced some Open Days to take place on a Sunday, while also they were introduced in relatively recent days on a Saturday in the era of tuition fees and growing competition to attract applicants and students. The UCU Surrey branch notes the extra workload that this brings upon staff to give substantial parts of their weekend on Saturdays and/or Sundays in order to run Open Days. Furthermore, under UK law¹ any staff member of an organisation has no obligation to work on a Sunday and that, if required, this must be agreed in writing. It is therefore very important to consult widely with academic and professional services staff who may be directly or indirectly affected by the introduction of Sunday Open Days and to respect their position in light of the law as is common practice amongst many employers.

Staff across the University may have differing views on whether Sunday Open Days are right or wrong in principle. However, legally the University is required to consult widely with all staff involved and seek their agreement to take part. Furthermore, organising a Sunday Open Day in the hope staff will willingly participate may indirectly put obligation on staff to participate, and such an obligation is illegal. This problem has undoubtedly been exacerbated by some staff choosing not to participate in a Sunday Open Day, which then obliges other colleagues to have to take their place. Therefore, a Sunday Open Day must only ever happen subject to the following conditions given in this charter in line with the law:

1. A full consultation is made with all staff potentially affected. They are to be asked to provide their formal agreement that they will participate on a given date. If an insufficient number and demography (i.e. from every department and relevant central services in the University) agree to take part, the Sunday Open Day must categorically not happen or be re-scheduled to another day.

2. On any consultation with staff, it must clearly be communicated to all involved that they are not under any obligation to support the proposed Sunday Open Day and that the University fully respects their right not to work on a Sunday.

3. No member of staff must be obliged to find cover for their role at a Sunday Open Day that they do not wish to participate in or for which they are unavailable. Staffing responsibilities should lie with the Open Day organisers and not individual staff members.

4. Consent to participate in Sunday Open Days must be sought annually.

A further issue that arises as a result of the Sunday Open Days in relation to the University's employment policy is that academic staff and professional services staff above level 5 are not explicitly covered by the time off in lieu (TOIL) Guidelines and thus not entitled to it, which can be considered less favourable treatment. Staff at level 4 and below are entitled to two days time off in lieu for working on a Sunday. Therefore, with two Sunday Open Days and a Saturday Open Day, a member of staff can gain a week's extra annual leave. This causes internal staffing problems to cover for extra time off. For academic staff it may be less within their interests of wellbeing to participate in a Sunday Open Day as any time off in lieu is unavailable and unlikely to be possible to take soon after due to substantial teaching duties the following days.

Additional to the legal requirements on Sunday working, it is also important to note the Equalities Act in light of a Friday, Saturday or Sunday Open Day requires the need to avoid discrimination in relation to matters including health, religion or belief, caring responsibilities in particular. This further emphasises the need for wide consultation with all staff affected. The University are requested to follow the above guidelines for the wider benefit of the University community which values our staff and in turn works for the better in running our Open Days.



Mental health is a trade union issue: 8,15,22, July 2021, Online (national course)

Course meeting dates: 8th 15th 22nd July 2021

Course meeting times: 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Duration: 3 weeks

Total hours: 15 - 18 hours over 3 weeks

Location: Online

This course will help you to:

- develop an understanding of mental health conditions and issues
- identify how people with mental health conditions experience discrimination in the workplace
- represent and support members with mental health conditions
- discuss the role of trade unions in dealing with mental health issues
- how can we negotiated workplace policies that support those with mental health conditions and issues
- assess how the current pandemic has impacted on mental health conditions and issues

Throughout the course we will use the social model when discussing mental health. the social model states that a person becomes disabled by the environment and attitudinal barriers that they encounter, not by their medical condition

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/11397/Mental-health-is-a-trade-union-issue-81522-July-2021-Online-national-course>

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