

Joint University/UCU Committee

21/29 A meeting of the Joint University/UCU Committee was held on Thursday 4 November 2021 at 14.00 remotely, via Microsoft Teams.

Present:

Sally Fellow, President of Reading UCU [*Chair*]
Dr Ian Bland, UCU Representative
John Brady, Director of HR
Dr David Field, UCU Representative
Moray McAulay, UCU Regional Official
Dr Richard Messer, Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary
Claire Rolstone, Assistant Director of HR (Advisory Services)
Professor Robert Van de Noort, Vice Chancellor
Professor Parveen Yaqoob, Deputy Vice Chancellor
Nat Willmott, UCU Representative

Katie Smith, Senior Governance Officer [*Secretary*]

21/30 Memorandum on Disclosure of Interests, Terms of Reference and Risk

The Memorandum on Disclosure of Interests, Terms of Reference and Risk was noted.

21/31 Membership and Terms of Reference 2021/22

The Membership and Terms of Reference for 2021/22 were noted.

The President of Reading UCU highlighted that certain documents in the papers were not disability aware and included some unsuitable fonts, for example. The Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary agreed to reinforce the guidance which was already in place and advised that there was a working group looking to make further improvements in this area.

Action: Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary

21/32 Minutes of the meeting held on 19 May 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 May 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

21/33 Matters Arising not covered elsewhere on the agenda

a) Minute 21/21 *Update on the local UCU claim*

Following a request by the President of Reading UCU to review the ‘academic-related’ coding used, the Director of HR again highlighted that contracts were very clearly labelled and there should be no confusion regarding their status; however, they would undertake to ensure that the label was properly understood and the coding name would be changed if possible.

b) Minute 21/22 *Update on Phase 1*

The Vice Chancellor confirmed that the latest Phase 1 review meeting papers would be published online as soon as possible. It was noted that the Secretary was also in the process of updating the Joint University/UCU Committee minutes published online.

21/34 Report of the Vice Chancellor

The Committee had received the Vice Chancellor’s report to Senate from June, however it was noted that there had in fact been a meeting of Senate the previous day – it was agreed that the Secretary would circulate the correct report following the meeting.

Action: Secretary

The Committee received an update from the Vice Chancellor's October report to Senate and the following was noted in particular:

- Students were being permitted to start the academic year at a distance where they had good reason to do so, but were expected to be on campus from January. Efforts were being made to give international student the opportunity to travel to the UK now the number of red-light countries was reducing. It was hoped that such developments would help manage the workload of colleagues who were currently teaching both online and face-to-face. Vaccination rates within the student population had generally been very good, with the on-campus vaccination bus being accessed by over 300 students.
- A range of activities and events had been held for Black History Month.
- The process to appoint a new Chancellor was underway and the job description had been shared with staff for comment before consideration by a working group established by Council.
- Undergraduate admission numbers were very close to the Phase 1 target, meaning that it would be possible to implement a 1.5% pay award which otherwise would have been withheld as part of the Phase 1 agreement.
- The University had performed strongly in the recent survey of Graduate outcomes. Whilst the 'positive destinations' score had dropped, UoR was now in the top quartile of the sector.
- Research income had fallen slightly short of target, having been impacted by the Covid pandemic and changes in government policy – against the initial target of £40m in grants won, £38.3m had been secured in 2020/21.
- The University had been ranked in the 201-250 band globally and equal 29th for UK institutions in the Times Higher World University Rankings, showing good progress. UoR had also climbed from 62nd to 61st in the Guardian University Guide Rankings which reflected improved graduate outcomes. The importance of National Student Survey outcomes in relation to rankings was highlighted and efforts were being made to improve these.
- The University had recently signed a new contract with the Cambridge Education Group (CEG) to include an international foundation bridging portfolio into programmes in Business and Economics.
- Work was underway with Wokingham Borough Council regarding the potential development of land in Shinfield and Arborfield, including around Thames Valley Science Park and the Hall Farm site. In addition, a scoping exercise was being conducted to identify strategic opportunities to enhance the scale, impact and sustainability of UoR's food and agriculture research.
- The Community Action Partnership was helping to increase RUSU's engagement with the external community.
- The University had partnered with the John Sykes Foundation to launch a Community Fund to support the local community – there had been a substantial number of applications from colleagues and the successful projects would be supporting disadvantaged groups in Reading.

UCU representatives raised a number of concerns regarding the contract with CEG, including in relation to the privatisation of education and legitimising the use of third party providers. It was suggested that space and resources should be available as a priority (if not exclusively) to UoR staff and students - access to others would need to take into consideration aspects such as campus cards and the licensing of such students. It was suggested that this teaching work could be undertaken by UoR's own staff and it was highlighted that UCU as an organisation had concerns regarding foundation colleges, who had a tendency to pay staff less and issue shorter term contracts etc. The Vice Chancellor advised that, while international foundation programmes were also run through ISLI, it

was not possible to recruit the volume of international students that could be achieved by an external provider, who had the benefit of a stronger network of agents. In relation to space, the University was working towards making more efficient use of its own estate, including rental agreements with the Royal Berkshire Hospital as well as various cafes and outlets. It was highlighted that increased recruitment and better use of space were both essential for the University's financial viability. The intention to strengthen direct relationships with agents as part of broader plans to grow the Partnerships office was also confirmed, which would then enable greater control of how international students were recruited. UCU representatives requested that clear guidelines and boundaries be set in place to manage the expectations of students joining via CEG. It was queried how the pay and conditions of staff undertaking work for CEG compared with those of UoR staff. The Vice Chancellor advised that CEG had been selected through a formal and transparent procurement process which included a number of safeguards in relation to sustainability, modern slavery etc. with clear guidance of what was expected from suppliers – the Vice Chancellor agreed to bring the principles which applied to all organisations the University worked with to a future meeting.

Action: Vice Chancellor

UCU representatives queried how it had been calculated that 90% of students had been vaccinated. The Deputy Vice Chancellor advised that an in-person survey had been held for new students when they arrived and returning students had been surveyed online. It was noted that surveys across the sector were demonstrating student vaccination rates of approximately 90% and PHE data on 19-24 year olds showed that the rate of vaccination was higher in those who were university students than generally for the age group. UCU representatives suggested that vaccinated students were more likely to respond to such surveys and expressed concern that 90% was a misleading figure; however, they were advised that there was no more accurate way of obtaining this data given that the University was not allowed to hold data on individual vaccine statuses and surveys therefore had to be anonymous.

21/35 Report of the President of Reading UCU

The President of Reading UCU advised that the ballot on industrial action in relation to the proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension arrangements had closed earlier that day and results were as yet unknown. Concerns had been noted from members in relation to a decrease in the quality of the scheme and its unaffordability; however, it was acknowledged that USS remained a good pension scheme and the University was asked to ensure that staff understood the need to protect their futures through joining pension schemes. It was also requested that the University work together with UCU on matters relating to pensions.

In relation to Health and Safety, the President of Reading UCU requested information regarding a recent incident at Greenlands, including what learning opportunities had been identified following this. The Deputy Vice Chancellor clarified that the MIT had been established in response to an outbreak

The MIT had been active for just under a week but was now closed; lessons learned had not yet been identified but Senior Programme Leads were considering any actions required. UCU representatives raised concerns regarding decisions being made for the winter, such as a return to offices with the requirement that all windows be kept open, and requested that further information be communicated in relation to this. The Deputy Vice Chancellor advised that the MRT was working on communications regarding plans for the rest of the winter but wanted to avoid overloading colleagues with information following feedback received. UCU advised that a number of members had been contacting the branch for advice regarding risk assessments and, although colleagues were doing their best, some of these queries were concerning. The Deputy Vice Chancellor advised that staff should be completing risk assessments with their Line Manager and could liaise with their local Health & Safety Coordinator regarding any queries. The Deputy Vice Chancellor agreed to feed back to Health & Safety Services that HSCs could further reinforce the fact that they could provide help with risk assessments and also advised that a Covid support inbox, previously used for the reporting of positives test results, was expected to be re-established and could be an additional route for such queries.

Action: Deputy Vice Chancellor

[Post-meeting note: the Deputy Vice Chancellor requested that information regarding the role of local HSCs in providing advice be included in a communication from the MRT the following week. They also asked the Health & Safety Services Director and Director of Technical Services to consider the visibility of HSCs and was advised that Safety Note 26 on the role of HSCs was due for review shortly. Additionally, there was a new e-learning module on risk assessments available to all staff on UoRLearn and another on Health & Safety Management would soon be available.]

UCU representatives highlighted that, while vaccination was very significant, it was also important to take a measured approach and keep in mind the continuing impact/implications of infection, including on family members, and the impact of Covid on staff who had existing vulnerabilities and disabilities. It was noted that research on long Covid was continuing to emerge. Concerns were raised by UCU regarding colleagues who, for whatever reason, did not want to return to campus when messaging stated that they needed to – assurance was sought that each case would be dealt with sensitively and personal circumstances would be taken into account, rather than the application of disciplinary procedures. The Director of HR confirmed that the University would always expect Line Managers to be sympathetic and deal with any such requests reasonably and consistently, in any circumstances. It was, however, highlighted that it was not necessarily always in the best interest of colleagues to be encouraged to stay away from the University; if an individual's concerns might be considered irrational, for example, it would be important to work carefully with them through Occupational Health and their Line Manager. UCU representatives queried what action a member of staff should take if they were living with others who were testing positive for Covid but were not themselves testing positive. The Deputy Vice Chancellor advised that PHE guidance should be followed in such a case – a pragmatic decision to stay off campus might also be taken following discussion with the individual's Line Manager. UCU representatives suggested that a more explicit statement on this would be useful, however the Deputy Vice Chancellor noted that any such decision would depend on a variety of factors and a blanket statement would not be appropriate – it was suggested that the Covid inbox could be used to assist with enquiries such as this.

In relation to ECMWF, UCU representatives advised that concerns remained regarding the impact on the Art department, particularly in the context of the Augar review and a noted increase in costs for the new Art building. It was also queried to what extent colleagues within the Art department were aware of current plans. It was confirmed that staff in Art had been aware of developments for some time and had been very constructively engaged in the process so far. It was noted that certain documentation had been sent to the President of Reading UCU requesting the strictest level of confidence and further clarity was requested on what this meant in terms of consultation with UCU. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that this was provided for the attention of the Branch Committee only, noting that as it was necessary to go through a formal tendering process for the Art building, it was important that the figures not be in the public domain to ensure best value for the tender. It was agreed that further clarity would be helpful as to the level of confidentiality required when documents were shared with UCU – e.g. that 'immediate branch colleagues' included the UCU Regional Official. UCU representatives queried why there was a separate paper on Art and the Vice Chancellor responded that, while it had been agreed that information on ECMWF be shared with Senate, UCU and the Staff Forum, typically capital projects below that level would not be included as part of that process.

21/36 Update on the local UCU claim

UCU noted that the remaining element of the claim was in relation to the gender pay gap and confirmed that they would be contacting the University within the next few weeks to establish a sub-group to initially review any data. It was noted that, since the claim had been lodged, there had been further developments in the sector and attention was focusing on additional pay gaps, such as the ethnicity pay gap, disability pay gap etc. UCU representatives suggested that it would be useful to widen the scope of this particular element of the claim and queried whether all measures of equality could be included; it was acknowledged that this was not part of the original claim lodged, however UCU could go back to members to re-ballot if necessary. The Director of HR advised that the process of gathering information for the gender pay gap report (to be submitted by March 2022) was underway and would include 'snapshot' data from March 2021. UCU was advised that the University was already looking into areas such as ethnicity and disability as part of other ongoing work. It was highlighted that considering additional pay gaps (either sequentially or consecutively) would delay any outcome, particularly as the quality of data varied for different pay gaps. UCU representatives noted

the need to ensure that there were not any unintended consequences from progress on the gender pay gap that could impact on other pay gaps. The President of Reading UCU agreed to advise the University when it had been established which branch colleagues would be involved in this work.

Action: President of Reading UCU

UCU requested an update on the progress of focus groups reviewing workload and was advised that dates for these would be confirmed shortly. It was noted that UCU had launched a national survey on workload – the UCU Regional Official highlighted that this survey was open to everyone in the sector, not just UCU members, and suggested that the University might consider sharing this information. They also noted that there had been a specific section on workloads in a previous agreement; this was consistently identified as a key issue of concern to members and, while focus groups had a vital role in this, it was also hoped to progress the negotiation that the University had agreed to in principle.

In relation to the Portfolio Review, UCU representatives expressed concerns around the clarity of the rationale behind this and the fact that it would be a significant project, progressed at speed, which would have considerable implications for a number of administrative teams (RISIS, timetabling etc.) who were already under pressure. The Vice Chancellor advised that information on the Portfolio Review had been shared previously in an All Staff Briefing. They clarified that the current system of education delivery was considered to be overly complicated, incurring significant oncosts and contributing to higher workloads. It was anticipated that tuition fees would likely remain frozen for years to come and, in order to deal with this, the University would be required to either cut costs or increase income. The Portfolio Review was intended to make the system simpler, remove marginal activities and put the University in a position to increase student numbers while maintaining current levels of staff. It was acknowledged that the review would result in an increase in workload but a significant reduction in workload was expected as a consequence of its implementation. It was added that a sizeable resource request had been approved which would result in a number of posts across several functions. It was confirmed that a significant amount of outreach was being undertaken, including drop-in sessions two mornings a week. Whilst guidance was being given to individual Schools and Departments, there would be local implementation of changes, including identifying which programmes were viable to continue etc. It was highlighted that changes to the academic year were overdue in relation to the rest of the sector and it had been considered beneficial to address this at the same time as other changes. It was acknowledged that there would be challenges but the need to be more efficient and allow student numbers to grow was emphasised.

Items brought forward by the University

21/37 Update on Phase 1

This item was covered elsewhere in the meeting.

Items brought forward by Reading UCU

This item was covered elsewhere in the meeting.

Routine items

21/38 Personal Titles – outcomes from 2020-21

The paper regarding outcomes from the 20/21 round of the Personal Titles process was noted.

21/39 Matters from the Staffing Committee

The Committee received the minutes of the most recent Staffing Committee, held in October. It was noted that, following analysis of applications received, the Staffing Committee had agreed that the Annual Leave Purchase Scheme should continue to be offered as this was viewed by staff as a positive benefit. UCU representatives noted that the measure of offering additional leave had been included in the Phase 1 agreement as a way to generate savings and it was queried when a further discussion on this would be held, including reviewing the success of the voluntary severance option offered. The Director of HR advised that this information would be shared with the review group in the first instance – it was anticipated that the next meeting would take place in January.

21/40 Any Other Business

There was no other business discussed.

21/41 Date of next meeting

Tuesday 1 February 2022