

Joint University/UCU Committee

23/18 A meeting of the Joint University/UCU Committee was held on Thursday 2 November 2023 at 14.00 in Committee Room 1, Whiteknights House/remotely via Microsoft Teams.

Present:

Dr Deepa Driver, President of Reading UCU [*Chair*]
Rita Balestrini, UCU Representative
Dr Simon Clarke, Senate Representative
Moray McAulay, UCU Regional Official – *via Teams*
Dr Richard Messer, Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary – *via Teams*
Ellen Owens, UCU Representative
Hattie Robinson, UCU Representative – *via Teams*
Claire Rolstone, Director of HR
Professor Robert Van de Noort, Vice Chancellor
Professor Parveen Yaqoob, Deputy Vice Chancellor
Katie Smith, Senior Governance Officer [*Secretary*]

No apologies were received on this occasion.

23/19 Memorandum on Disclosure of Interests and Terms of Reference

The Committee noted the memorandum and members were asked to disclose any interests. [Redacted, section 40].

23/20 Membership and Terms of Reference 2023/24

The current membership and terms of reference for 2023/24 were noted; the President of Reading UCU advised that UCU might provide further comments regarding these in due course.

23/21 Minutes of the meeting held on 17 May 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 May 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

23/22 Matters Arising

a) Minute 23/11 *Minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2023*

It was confirmed that the Secretary had made the requested clarification to the minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2023.

b) *Minute 23/14 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

It was confirmed that the University Secretary had provided further details to the previous President of Reading UCU regarding the decision taken by the Estates Committee in relation to an increase in parking charges.

23/23 Report of the Vice Chancellor

The Committee received and noted the Vice Chancellor's October report to Senate.

23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU

The President of Reading UCU raised a number of matters during the course of a wide-ranging discussion; these have been noted below, together with the subsequent responses from University representatives.

- The President of Reading UCU noted the update recently provided at Senate and requested a more detailed analysis of the University's current financial situation. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that, in relation to student numbers, there was currently a [redacted, section 43] shortfall against target. The number of students had increased; however, this still fell short against the target set in order to deliver the £30m deficit budget agreed by Council. The intention had been to generate half of the deficit from increased student numbers and half from savings; it would therefore now be necessary to increase savings. The Vice Chancellor noted challenges caused by inflation and the fact that the value of tuition fees had been fixed for many years. In response to a query, the Vice Chancellor confirmed that approximately [redacted, section 43] would now be required from savings - it would be necessary to offset the budget by using the savings from the reduction in USS employer contributions against the shortfall. It was clarified that, if these savings were to be used in a different way, an additional [redacted, section 43] would need to be found elsewhere in the budget. The President of Reading UCU requested further explanation and details in terms of these figures. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that they would be happy for a session to take place to enable relevant colleagues from Finance to talk the President of Reading UCU through the figures.

Action: Vice Chancellor

The President of Reading UCU noted that the reduction in USS employer contributions had already been allocated to offset the shortfall in student

numbers. RUCU requested the VC to review the finances and proposed a one-off non-consolidated payment to all staff might be made possible.

Action: Vice Chancellor

- The President of Reading UCU highlighted that workload continued to be an issue. The Vice Chancellor advised that the portfolio review had been undertaken in order to streamline and drive efficiencies in terms of the amount of assessment undertaken and the number of programmes/modules delivered. The President of Reading UCU commented that the burdens of efficiency and workload were felt by staff but decisions on spending (for example, in relation to the University of Reading Malaysia and the recent ground source heat pumps) were taken on a level that staff did not feel able to influence. UCU would therefore like to see more consultation with staff regarding significant expenditures. The Vice Chancellor noted that there was already an agreement in place regarding the University taking significant decisions to UCU and the Staff Forum before Council, as well as an agreement that the University would engage with UCU regarding proposals above a certain level of cost. However, they also highlighted that it was essential for the University to be able to work nimbly. It was clarified that the heat pumps had been almost fully funded from external sources/subsidies and would only help to improve income.
- The President of Reading UCU noted recent transitions/departures in senior teams across the University; it was queried what vacancies still remained and what impact this would have on the workloads of others. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that a new Dean and two new Pro-Deans were now in place at Henley Business School. Recruitment was expected to begin shortly for the position of Head of ISLI. Following the departure of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) in the summer, Professor Dominik Zaum had taken on this role in the interim, meaning that Professor Parveen Yaqoob was now Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research and Innovation) full-time. Recruitment was currently underway for a permanent (i.e. for a 6-year term) Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource). Overall, this was considered to be normal turnover for a senior team.
- The President of Reading UCU raised the matter of academic freedom, with particular reference to Israel and Gaza. A desire was expressed for the University community to advocate for peace and solidarity; UCU also sought assurance that there was a strong commitment within the University to safeguard academic freedom and the right to speak about the Palestinian question. The Vice Chancellor advised that staff and students from both sides

of the conflict had recently attended a discussion about how the University could support them. The Vice Chancellor also provided reassurance that academic freedom would be defended, within the law, and highlighted that the University's Royal Charter included specific reference to this. They suggested that the role of the University was to provide cohesion within its community through bringing together students and staff from both sides of the argument. The UCU Regional Official emphasised UCU's position as condoning in the strongest possible terms any actions internationally that targeted civilian life by all parties, as well as all incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia. Furthermore, the President of Reading UCU advised that UCU had sought assurance from the USS in relation to the ethical investment of its funds. It was also highlighted that UCU had a strong position regarding BDS. The Vice Chancellor advised that the University followed an ethical investment policy and did not invest in any company on the UN list of companies that provided armature in areas of conflict.

- There was a discussion regarding the recent UKRI decision to suspend members of its Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Board; UCU raised concerns in relation to this, as well as the subsequent lack of commitment from UKRI to the EDI agenda now perceived by UCU members. The Vice Chancellor noted recent communications received from UKRI regarding their commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, as well as maintaining a stronger sense of people, culture and environment with regards to the development of REF 2028.
- The President of Reading UCU raised a number of concerns in relation to Lecture Capture. They noted that the Lecture Capture policy had been due for review in 2022 but suggested that UCU had not been involved in this in the typical way, possibly due to the Covid pandemic. UCU's concerns related to aspects such as performance rights, the right to erasure and the amount of time recordings were retained. UCU requested a separate set of meetings in order to review the Lecture Capture policy and ensure it was compliant. Furthermore, UCU wanted to bring to the University's attention that, within certain areas, colleagues were being told that the expectation was that lecture capture would take place; members were advising that the right to opt out was no longer clear and it was being implied that feedback scores might be lower were they not to engage in lecture capture. The President of Reading UCU highlighted the need to set expectations with students about the intentions of this policy and to ensure that colleagues who were opting out were not going to be penalised as a result. The Director of HR confirmed that multiple attempts had been made to consult with UCU on this policy – it had not been put in place without attempting appropriate consultation,

regardless of the Covid pandemic. The President of Reading UCU was asked to provide their specific concerns in writing; the Director of HR could then work with relevant colleagues to review the extent to which these points had been covered during the development of the policy as part of the previous consultation process.

Action: President of Reading UCU

- The President of Reading UCU requested that Council reconsider UCU's previous request for observer status on Council. They suggested that it was important in the interest of good governance that staff had appropriate representation at various levels of decision making at the University; observer status would enable UCU to be closer to decision making and contribute productively at a stage when changes could still be made. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that this was a decision for the President of Council. It was clarified that UCU's prior request had not been granted for a number of reasons, including the fact that colleagues who were representatives on Council were elected as independent members - there was nothing to stop UCU being elected if they could achieve sufficient votes. Additionally, members of Council had a legal responsibility for decision making and it had not been considered appropriate to have observers present who were not bound by the same rules and regulations as members. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that they would, however, be happy for this request to be passed on to the current President of Council. The President of Reading UCU indicated their desire for the University's senior management team to support this request, noting that it would be useful to speak to the Vice Chancellor about any reservations they might have and what assurances UCU could provide which would allow such a request to be supported.

Action: Vice Chancellor

- While the President of Reading UCU expressed gratitude for a response to the USS consultation having recently been shared with RUCU, permission to share it with UCU members was not granted. The President of Reading UCU requested that the University reconsider its standard position on providing such responses or give a formal reason for not disclosing these. The Vice Chancellor highlighted the importance of both UCEA and UUK being environments for free conversation that allowed submissions to be done in private in order to emerge with a unified view. The Vice Chancellor also observed that they had made a public statement in support of the restoration of benefits some time ago. The President of Reading UCU commented that many other employers disclosed their responses to consultations; they again requested that the University reconsider this and also asked the Vice Chancellor to provide a form of words about why they had not agreed to

provide the response to all staff on this occasion. RUCU members had passed a motion requesting this.

Action: Vice Chancellor

UCU representatives were also concerned that they had perceived a slight inclination towards defined contributions in recent papers and reiterated the importance of ensuring that defined benefit schemes be protected in the long term. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that no discussions had taken place regarding moving to a defined contribution scheme but that they want sustainability and are thinking more of conditional indexation.

- The President of Reading UCU highlighted UCU's policy position on Prevent, noting in particular concerns regarding the misuse of Prevent to push a hostile environment, whilst also recognising tensions between respecting students/colleagues and adhering to legislative requirements. It was emphasised that UCU took an active position against the surveillance of colleagues and students. The University Secretary confirmed that it was necessary for the University to comply with Prevent in order to meet regulatory requirements from the Office for Students. The President of Reading UCU agreed to send their specific concerns relating to Prevent to the University Secretary.

Action: President of Reading UCU

- The President of Reading UCU noted that the Vice Chancellor was Chairing the UUK Working Group on the Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy and indicated that they would be interested to hear more in terms of the impact on UoR and other universities. The Vice Chancellor provided a brief update on this work, noting the need for every university to assure itself regarding trusted research funders and the fact that there was currently significant duplication of activity relating to this. Other areas, such as export licenses, also required due diligence and could potentially be improved by working more centrally.
- The President of Reading UCU indicated their desire to understand more about the impact on workloads resulting from the imminent changes to departments within the School of Humanities, having heard concerns from colleagues about the reconfiguration of these. While UCU had been relieved to hear that there was no intention to make redundancies, it was highlighted that there was still likely to be a significant impact on colleagues. UCU was also concerned regarding the short timeframe between the November decision of Council and the implications for January, and the impact this could have on the possibility for meaningful consultation with UCU. The Vice

Chancellor noted that the intention would be for a Responsible Officer to consult with UCU once a formal point had been reached. UCU asked whether it would be possible to begin this dialogue any earlier, given that a lot of feedback had already been received from UCU members in Humanities and UCU would like to discuss this on their behalf. The Director of HR confirmed that there had already been a significant amount of engagement between the interim Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) and staff in the School of Humanities; however, they would be happy to liaise with Professor Zaum with regards to the timing of establishing a dialogue with UCU.

Action: Director of HR

- The President of Reading UCU requested an update regarding the University of Reading Malaysia (UoRM). The Vice Chancellor advised that the new Pro-Vice Chancellor (International) had now visited the Malaysian campus and a number of external studies had recently been commissioned in order to understand the capacity for UoRM to recruit more students and become more financially self-sustainable; these had concluded that this must be possible but there were a number of aspects which would first need to be addressed. [Redacted, section 43]. In response to a comment regarding this timeframe having been given previously, the Vice Chancellor explained that, had the Covid pandemic not occurred, it would have been possible by now to evaluate the results of the restructure undertaken in 2019. It was highlighted that the Malaysian government had been much stricter in terms of Covid than the UK government and the impact on the ability to bring students onto the Malaysian campus had therefore been much more significant.
- With reference to the Artificial Intelligence Working Group, the President of Reading UCU sought assurance on the safeguards being put in place in relation to materials being used to train AI and to prevent Turnitin from selling data in ways that reduced autonomy and privacy. The Vice Chancellor noted that it might be appropriate to seek advice from the Chief Digital and Information Officer in relation to this.

Action: Vice Chancellor

- The President of Reading UCU highlighted the impact that Blackboard Ultra was having on workloads, particularly given the fact that the roll-over of modules was no longer automatic. The Vice Chancellor noted that positive feedback had also been received regarding the new system but agreed to pass this on to the relevant colleagues.

Action: Vice Chancellor

- UCU representatives noted that work had already begun regarding the Rewards Committee process review and expressed their desire to be involved with such discussions at an earlier stage, rather than being consulted once the work had already been fully developed. The Director of HR confirmed that there was a working group relating to the review of the Reward Committee process; they would be happy to discuss the proposals with UCU, which were intended to simplify and streamline the current process.

Action: Director of HR

- UCU raised concerns from members regarding changes in reward processes/promotion criteria having consequences in terms of the PDR process, such as its format and how it linked to objectives, and indicated that they would like to discuss this matter thoroughly while there was still time. The Vice Chancellor advised that the interim Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) was leading on the expectations and workload pathway and had met with UCU as part of the discussions allowing the collective agreement. No agreement was reached. Work has now been undertaken by the university (individual expectations framework) and will be shared with UCU in due course.

Items brought forward by the University

No further items were brought forward during the meeting.

Items brought forward by Reading UCU

23/25 Update on USS negotiations and implications

This matter had been covered earlier in the meeting; however, the President of Reading UCU suggested working together to celebrate the success of what had been achieved jointly in terms of USS, such as the increased defined benefit threshold.

23/26 Update on JNCHES negotiations and implications

The President of Reading UCU raised concerns in relation to both USS and JNCHES regarding the position being taken by UCEA and the transition in negotiation arrangements from UUK to UCEA. It was confirmed that UCU intended to liaise with UUK regarding the implications of any such transition, noting that this could potentially precipitate further strike action. It was hoped to discuss areas such as equalisation, casualisation and workloads at the next Joint Negotiating Committee.

23/27 Update on the current phase of reorganisation

This matter had been covered earlier in the meeting; however, the President of

Reading UCU requested to be kept aware of any other major changes under consideration relating to potential reorganisation or restructure, in order to be able to engage early and proactively. The Director of HR confirmed that they would be happy to meet with the President of Reading UCU on a monthly basis in order to share information.

Action: Director of HR

Routine items

23/28 Personal Titles – outcomes from 2022/23

The Committee received and noted a paper regarding outcomes from the 2022/23 round of the Personal Titles process.

23/29 Matters from Staffing Committee

The Committee received and noted a report from the most recent Staffing Committee held in June.

23/30 Any other business

The following was raised:

- The Director of HR advised that there had been some delays to the implementation of the new HR management system and it had been necessary to re-plan certain phases of the project.
- UCU Representatives again raised the matter of KTP contracts. The Director of HR reiterated that matters such as sick leave, annual leave etc. aligned with the policies of the company that the University was working with and reaffirmed their willingness to liaise with the UCU Regional Official if this practice was not in line with what was taking place at other universities.

23/31 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Thursday 7 March 2024.