

Joint University/UCU Committee

24/33 A meeting of the Joint University/UCU Committee was held on Thursday 31 October 2024 at 14.30 in Committee Room 1, Whiteknights House/remotely via Microsoft Teams.

Present:

Professor Robert Van de Noort, Vice Chancellor [Chair]
Rita Balestrini, Reading UCU Workload and Health & Safety Officer – via Teams
Dr Simon Clarke, Senate Representative
Dr Deepa Driver, President of Reading UCU – via Teams
Colette Maxfield, UCU Branch Administrator – via Teams
Dr Richard Messer, Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary
Anne O’Sullivan, UCU Regional Official – via Teams
Ellen Owens, Reading UCU Treasurer – via Teams
Claire Rolstone, Director of HR
Katie Smith, Senior Governance Officer [Secretary]

Apologies were received from:

Moray McAulay, UCU Regional Official
Professor Parveen Yaqoob, Deputy Vice Chancellor

The Vice Chancellor had asked the University Secretary to Chair this meeting on their behalf until they were able to join; any actions on the Vice Chancellor would be picked up later in the meeting as required.

24/34 Minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2024

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 September 2024 were agreed as a correct record, subject to the changes already requested by UCU.

Action: Secretary

24/35 Matters Arising

- a) Minute 24/25 – Minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 May 2024

UCU had, that afternoon, sent the Secretary minor comments on the minutes of the meeting held on 22 May 2024; these would be reviewed in due course.

Action: Secretary

- b) Minute 24/26 b) - Report of the President of Reading UCU

The action for the Director of HR to consider how best to reflect UCU's contribution to EDI activities was ongoing.

Action: Director of HR

- c) Minute 24/26 c) (24/12 k), 24/04) - Report of the Vice Chancellor

The action for the Vice Chancellor to ask the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) to share data showing that the University currently had no more students and no less staff than in 2014 (including the data split between front-line teaching staff, research staff and Professional Services staff) was not covered during the meeting and was therefore carried over.

Action: Vice Chancellor

- d) Minute 24/17 - Update on student recruitment

It was confirmed that UCU had been provided with access to the student recruitment dashboards.

- e) Minute 24/27 - Report of the Vice Chancellor

The action for the Vice Chancellor to refer UCU's questions (specifically - if the University was considering liquidating assets, which assets this would include - in what order - and what impact this would have on the University's ability to generate sufficient cash in-year to cover its net service cost) to Investments Committee was not covered during the meeting and was therefore carried over.

Action: Vice Chancellor

- f) Minute 24/27 - Report of the Vice Chancellor

In relation to access to Council papers, the President of Reading UCU advised that UCU had specified one section that was missing from a document and the names of two documents not provided to UCU.

- g) Minute 24/27 - Report of the Vice Chancellor

It was confirmed that UCU representatives had provided a list of questions in advance of their meeting with colleagues in Finance; while some responses had been provided to UCU already, others were still awaited.

- h) Minute 24/27 - Report of the Vice Chancellor

The Director of HR had shared the high-level modelling they had undertaken to calculate the savings for both the 7-month and 11-month pay award deferral options.

i) Minute 24/27 - Report of the Vice Chancellor

In relation to recruitment figures, UCU now had access to the relevant database.

j) Minute 24/27 - Report of the Vice Chancellor

The action regarding the timeline of upcoming meetings had now been superseded.

k) Minute 24/28 - Report of the President of Reading UCU

The action remained ongoing for the Director of HR and President of Reading UCU to liaise regarding performance management.

Action: Director of HR and President of Reading UCU

l) Minute 24/28 - Report of the President of Reading UCU

The GTA policy was included later on the agenda.

m) Minute 24/28 - Report of the President of Reading UCU

The President of Reading UCU had now sent the Director of HR the information requested regarding the Health and Safety workload FTE for facilities time.

n) Minute 24/29 Updates to Academic Probation and Personal Titles Procedures

The paper from the previous meeting, regarding updates to Academic Probation and Personal Titles procedures, had been carried forward to this meeting.

[The Vice Chancellor joined the meeting]

24/36 Report of the Vice-Chancellor

The Committee received and noted the Vice Chancellor's October report to Senate, which had met the previous day; the Vice Chancellor invited questions or comments.

24/37 Report of the President of Reading UCU

(For this, and later items, matters raised by the President of Reading UCU have been noted together with the subsequent responses from University representatives.)

The President of Reading UCU raised the following matters in relation to the proposed changes to the department of Chemistry:

- UCU stated that there were significant errors in the report presented to Senate (as detailed below). UCU requested that Senate reconsider a corrected version of the report before the matter was put before Council on 20 November. UCU also asked for the opportunity to make an intervention to Council, specifically regarding Chemistry, on 20 November 2024.
- UCU asked why no vote had been taken at Senate. The Vice Chancellor clarified that voting was typically only undertaken for matters that were for Senate to decide; in this case, Senate had been asked to comment on a proposal that was for the decision of Council. So no vote had been taken.
- Noting the current financial pressures the University was under, the President of Reading UCU stated that it was surprising that senior management was talking about financial pressures on the one hand, but failing to recognise that their decisions would further undermine the achievement of financial targets. The Vice Chancellor responded that, despite the financial challenges, it was still necessary for the University to address areas of underperformance, as well as to improve its NSS and REF submissions.
- RUCU noted that staff did not recognise the comments in the paper regarding poor performance of the Chemistry department vis a vis REF benchmarks. In fact, RUCU noted that the Chemistry department appeared to be outperforming in terms of REF performance vis a vis departmental FTE and the department's REF score was higher than that of six larger institutions.
- The President of Reading UCU also noted that income-in-kind had not been included in the paper, which was an important factor when UoR was ranked 2/41 for income-in-kind per FTE in the REF.
- A statement had been made by senior management that the Chemistry department was 52% below sector average in terms of the Field-Weighted Citation Index. The Reading UCU branch President asserted that this was not considered to be a standard (or the best) way of examining performance with respect to the REF. If the average score was 1.72 then Chemistry was in fact outperforming this at 1.85.
- Senior Management had suggested in the papers to Senate that there had been a decline in student numbers over the past five years; the opposite was in fact true, with Chemistry having the best student numbers this year for five years.
- With regards to the plan to close the MChem and MSci Programme, it was highlighted that all PhD programmes in Chemistry required a Masters and many BSc students from UoR transferred onto the Masters programme. The MSc

Chemistry was also a good source of overseas income.

- Concerns relating to the University's commitments on equality and access were also raised in terms of closing a programme which had a four-year Masters. It was noted that the absence of a feasible and appropriate student loan structure for the standard Masters, meant that many low-income and BAME students tend to prefer integrated Masters degrees due to the financial implications.
- Overseas funding restrictions on courses were noted and it was suggested that removing research related to energy would make the course less attractive to students.
- The strength of the partnership with NUIST was highlighted, in particular with regards to Chemistry. It was suggested that limiting research to REF Unit of Assessment 3 might make transferring students reconsider whether they wished to come to UoR. Both the NUIST partnership and ongoing research collaborations could be affected. The President of Reading UCU expressed concerns that information had been communicated to NUIST colleagues in advance of the relevant Chemistry colleagues even being aware. This had caused tensions at various levels.
- RUCU noted that the NSS information could be misleading, because of the timing of the NSS survey vis a vis the return to in-person exams.
- The PRP has since addressed student feedback within the NSS around assessment but the RUCU President noted that positive comments from the current cohort had not been taken into account.
- The Reading UCU branch President stated that University's financial position had led to a flood in the Chemistry labs which had adversely affected the NSS score in terms of learning resources. The RUCU branch President noted that it was unfair to penalise the Chemistry department for these failings, as the department was relying on the University to ensure appropriate maintenance of infrastructure.
- The estimated student numbers in the senior management paper for 2023/24 had omitted approximately 110 Chemistry students from NUIST as well as positive information relating to student numbers in 2024/25. The RUCU President noted that an increase in the BSc Chemistry group numbers went against the logic of increasing alignment with Pharmacy, with students selecting standard Chemistry rather than Pharmacy-related Chemistry options.
- The government's commitment to breaking down barriers for women in minorities to enter education, especially STEM subjects, was highlighted by the

RUCU President. She further noted that the closure of the Chemistry department which provided an important contribution to this agenda, did not align with this objective.

- Noting RUCU's broader concerns regarding senior management directing resources to certain areas and not to others, it was highlighted that Chemistry had requested consultancy support with regards to the NSS (which had been provided to certain other departments) but this had not been approved for Chemistry.
- RUCU asked about the Chemical Analysis Facility (CAF) and the impact that any changes would have on staff across other departments, noting that there would be less money going into CAF due to some of the research funding being moved out.

During the President of Reading UCU's report above, the Vice Chancellor requested RUCU from the Chair not to discuss the Chemistry matters at JUUC as he felt JUUC was not the correct forum for this discussion. He stated that RUCU would have a formal role if it was decided to move to a restructuring process. The RUCU comments could therefore be brought up in any such future consultation. The VC noted that Senate had discussed the same points at length the previous day and these comments would be recorded in the minutes of Senate which went to Council, where the decision would ultimately be made. The RUCU President noted that although senior management might choose to contest the information provided, the Reading UCU President's update would seek to cover RUCU's position on this matter. The UCU official noted concerns arising from the level of detail that could be captured in minutes.

The Vice Chancellor explained that the minutes of Senate would only include salient points. He noted however that Council included a representative from Senate who would have the opportunity to expand and reflect on the discussion which took place at Senate. If Council were to decide that Chemistry should be closed, then University policies on restructuring would commence and RUCU could contribute then.

The VC noted that it was not just financial issues under consideration but also issues of academic excellence that senior management was concerned about when making decisions about potential closure. The UCU Official responded that RUCU must have a say while proposals are still being formulated rather than once a decision had been taken by Council, and it was therefore useful to make these comments at the JUUC due to the significant impact on the University of the potential to close the Chemistry department.

The RUCU branch President further noted that it was vital that the chairing position

during this meeting should be used by the VC to facilitate discussion rather than to curtail it and the time spent on urging Reading UCU not to make their contribution in the way they saw fit. She noted that it might be quickest to allow her to progress with her update rather than spend time urging her not to. The Vice Chancellor then suggested that the President of Reading UCU might choose to submit their report to JUUC in writing in the future. The Reading UCU President agreed to consider the VC's request. The President of Reading UCU then thanked the Vice Chancellor for his comments and proceed to complete their report.

Items brought forward by Reading UCU

24/38 Union representation on Staffing Committee (now People and Culture Committee)

The following was noted in particular during discussion:

- The President of Reading UCU advised of their intention to request two seats on People and Culture Committee to enable health and safety matters and equality matters to be covered separately by two relevant RUCU representatives.
- The President of Reading UCU asked that the finalised Terms of Reference for the new People and Culture Committee be shared with RUCU.

Action: University Secretary/Director of HR

- The President of Reading UCU requested confirmation that health and safety issues would be retained formally alongside work-related stress and wellbeing within the remit of the University Health and Safety Committee, which is where they had previously been. The Director of HR confirmed that health and safety matters sat under the University Health and Safety Committee which included a representative from RUCU within its membership.
- In response to a query, the Director of HR clarified that Staff Forum was not included in the membership of People and Culture Committee; a colleague from the Staff Forum had been invited to give a presentation to one meeting for a particular topic because they had played an active role in organising wellbeing activities the previous year. UCU might also be invited to input for a relevant topic at a future meeting.
- The University Mental Health Charter and tackling stress in the workplace were highlighted by RUCU as discussion topics linked to wellbeing in which they should be able to participate. RUCU representatives reiterated their request to contribute regularly to People and Culture Committee as part of its

core membership.

24/39 Lessons learned from USS early retirement factors implementation

In relation to the USS early retirement factors implementation, the President of Reading UCU advised that USS recognised that there had not been effective communication regarding potential losses and had been undertaking a lessons learned exercise. The President of Reading UCU asked whether the University had any feedback in terms of staff affected by these changes; the Director of HR was not aware of any concerns from employees but agreed to check with Pension colleagues.

Action: Director of HR

24/40 University finances

In relation to University finances, the President of Reading UCU highlighted that UCU had not been consulted with regarding Tanners Farm, despite it being over the £10m threshold which should have triggered this, as per the previous collective agreement. The Vice Chancellor apologised if there had been an oversight but explained that the lack of consultation with UCU might have been because investment decisions were not included in the agreement – the Vice Chancellor would check whether an exception had been made for investments.

Action: Vice Chancellor

The President of Reading UCU emphasised that, even if UCU did not contribute to such decisions, it would still be beneficial for them to understand them and requested the opportunity to consider some of the papers that went into the decision-making.

24/41 PILON

The President of Reading UCU suggested deferring PILON to the next meeting to allow them to first discuss this with the Director of HR.

Action: Secretary

24/42 Temporary increase of hours on fractional contracts

The President of Reading UCU highlighted that there appeared to be a trend whereby a temporary increase of hours was being added to permanent contracts for a number of years, but staff were not being given rights in relation to uplifts, redundancy and redeployment when these additional hours ended, nor entitlement in terms of these additional hours becoming permanent. The Director of HR indicated their willingness to discuss this outside of the meeting and asked for more details/specific examples to help them look into this. UCU indicated that they would like this to be addressed more generally and the Director of HR agreed to discuss this with the Pro-Vice

Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource). UCU expect that there is no difference of treatment between fixed-term contracts and temporary-increase-of-hours contracts, and requested an update in writing of the status of these types of contracts - and how they are currently being used.

Action: Director of HR

24/43 GTA scheme and collective agreement

The President of Reading UCU advised that they would schedule a separate meeting with the Director of HR to discuss GTAs and the collective agreement.

Action: President of Reading UCU

24/44 Union representation on Council

The following was noted in particular during discussion:

- The President of Reading UCU reiterated their previous request for UCU to have observer status at Council; this would enable UCU to better understand the nuances of conversations and build a greater degree of trust.
- The University Secretary confirmed that the President of Council, who had significant experience of Chairing a range of bodies, did not wish to have observers present at Council as this could change the nature of the meeting; however, they were keen to ensure that the voices of staff were heard properly and had indicated that they would like to consider other ways in which lay members could get input from UCU on particular topics. The President of Reading UCU welcomed any suggestions from the President of Council and requested that these be provided before the next JUUC.

Action: University Secretary

- The President of Reading UCU highlighted that many boards now had potential trustees or members shadowing the work of specific committees and suggested that Council might consider allowing UCU to attend for certain sections. In the interim, the President of Reading UCU suggested twice yearly meetings with members of Council.
- The President of Reading UCU also raised that Reading UCU had not been informed that payroll was no longer deducting union subs through salary and asked to discuss this with the Director of HR outside of the meeting.

Action: President of Reading UCU and Director of HR

Items brought forward by the University

24/45 Updates to Academic Probation and Personal Titles Procedures

The Committee noted the paper carried over from the last meeting regarding updates to Academic Probation and Personal Titles procedures. The Director of HR proposed establishing a subgroup to consider these; the President of Reading UCU was asked to nominate two or three UCU representatives.

Action: President of Reading UCU

Routine items

24/46 Matters from the People and Culture Committee

The Committee received and noted a report from the most recent People and Culture Committee held in September. The following was noted in particular during discussion:

- The People and Culture Committee had changed its way of working to focus on one topic per meeting. The President of Reading UCU queried how other topics would be picked up outside of this. The University Secretary responded that, while it was the intention to spend the majority of a meeting on a particular topic, other topics might also need to be included as they arose; this approach would be reviewed at the end of the academic year.
- The President of Reading UCU suggested that the potential discomfort/stress that would arise from changes to the University be considered by People and Culture Committee on a regular basis, including the impact of financial distress following deferral of the pay award.
- The Director of HR confirmed that they had arranged a number of meetings with UCU, the Staff Forum, the Vice Chancellor and colleagues from Finance in order to review the pay award decision made. The UCU Regional Official noted that the next of these meetings would be taking place on 27 November and requested that the new budget (revised in light of recent student recruitment), and other financial information submitted to Council, be provided to UCU directly following Council's meeting on 20 November.

Action: Director of HR

24/47 Any other business

The following was raised under any other business:

- The President of Reading UCU sought the Vice Chancellor's thoughts in relation to the recent budget announcement. The Vice Chancellor advised that, although more detailed analysis was required, they anticipated that the

increase in National Insurance contributions, the lowering of thresholds and the increase to the National Minimum Wage combined was likely to incur an additional annual cost of £3-5m. Most changes would be implemented in April, meaning that only the last four months of this year's budget would be affected (approximately £1.5-2m this year). The Vice Chancellor intended to provide an update to Council and would share the data with UCU after this.

Action: Vice Chancellor

- The Director of HR advised that they had been reviewing the impact of changes to the National Minimum Wage and would provide an update regarding this at the next meeting.

Action: Director of HR

- As a closing remark, in relation to the idea of the possible use of fixed-term and temporary-increase-of-hours contracts to cope with fluctuations in students' recruitment, UCU quoted the guidelines of the UoR/UCU Local Pay and Equality Collective Agreement to clarify that this idea was not in the spirit of the Agreement.

24/48 Date of next meeting

Thursday 13 March 2025 at 10.00