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University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

January 2017

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Welcome to our first newsletter of 2017. It's been a hectic few weeks, so this is coming out later than we'd have liked, but we'll aim to do a newsletter every month throughout 2017, so please make sure that all our members and potential members get to see it, by passing it on to others.

As always, we welcome any points or questions that members want to make about anything to do with working life at the University.

Ivan Bonsell, Branch Secretary

The "Great" Financial Crisis Debate — Are Staff Costs too high at UoB?

Much has been said and written recently about the University's financial situation. The Vice Chancellor has made it clear that in her opinion, the staff costs are too high, since as a proportion of income of around 60%, they are significantly higher than many other institutions.

It is true that the University's finances have to be well managed. This means making sure that students want to come here and that costs do not spiral out of control. Also, loans for building projects need to be carefully dealt with, otherwise interest payments mean that funds cannot be found for other things.

Navigating the finances of the University is difficult and it's often not an exact science, since one person's crisis is another person's manageable risk. Fundamentally, for all higher education institutions, the government's intention to make universities compete with each other, for students and efficiency of delivery, leads to managers trying to extract more and more work for smaller costs. The laws of free-market competition, as applied to higher education as a public service, are a disaster for all who work in education and current, past and potential students.

What's most striking about the current situation, and Brighton is not unique here, is that staff costs have gone up by much more than inflation, but not as a result of higher pay settlements. It is a well-documented fact that over the last decade or so, national pay awards for university workers have fallen against inflation by 15-20% depending on where you start from and how you measure inflation.



(In March, UNISON's higher education conference will debate a motion that demands a 40% pay increase, which sounds ridiculous, but another decade of this and 40% will be what's required to get us back to where we should be!)

The introduction of tuition fees to effectively replace the bulk of government grants (in itself an accounting trick to reduce public expenditure, which will rebound on future governments as the loans become unrecoverable), led to a short term injection of funding, which was overshadowed by general funding falling well short of what was required for wages to be maintained in real terms. Universities like ours invested heavily in building projects and increased the number of staff in some areas, but did not increase pay, since the national pay settlements were generally well below inflation.

Generalised austerity across the public sector has arguably been worse for many council, health and education workers, which has made it look as if we're doing alright, but that doesn't stack up since many ordinary working people are struggling with rent, bills, travel and the general cost of living.

At Brighton, as far as it is possible to tell, staff costs have increased in recent years as a result of new professors, the creation of new deputy heads of schools and an increase in a number of higher grade professional staff in some areas. It is clearly not because support staff have seen significant increases in their pay or because we're not working hard.

The argument that Brighton's staff costs are "too high" is tenuous. Yes, in the way they are measured, they are high as a proportion of income compared to other institutions, but Brighton has very little contracting out of services or agency staff usage. It also depends on the mix of activity, making it very much a false exercise to compare this institution with others, without a clear breakdown of all the types of activity each institution is engaged in. Who's to say what the optimal staff cost/income ratio should be?

Unfortunately for those who consider that the staff costs/income ratio to be a problem, the University is about to make it worse, as a result of recent decisions. First, by deciding to close Hastings, the income from around 650 £9,000-paying students over the next couple of years will largely disappear, to be offset by the staff costs of those whose livelihoods will be ruined because Hastings doesn't fit the aspirations of the University. This will probably be around £5-6 million of lost income offset by a saving of perhaps £1-2 million in staff costs, once the closure is complete.

Secondly, the University has elected to charge £9,000 for continuing undergraduate students next year (and the year after) rather than a possible £9,250. Whilst we would want students to not have the burden of fees at all, giving away thousands of £250 units (estimated at around £2 million in total) in the hope that students will be grateful enough to recognise the gesture as they complete their student surveys, seems pretty reckless if the University faces a financial crisis.

It is reasonable to say that the University needs to make a surplus and that this should, over time, be enough to sustain investment in buildings and maintain repayment of managed loans. The University has made some significant surpluses over the last decade or so, and has cash balances to fund much of what's planned in terms of building projects, particularly given a realistic timescale. The cash position does not appear to be far from that of other institutions.



What we as a trade union don't accept, is that the staff costs are a problem that can't be managed by controlling new recruitment and restraining the salaries of those at the top who, unlike the rest of us, always seem to have to be paid colossal amounts so that we can "get the right people". It is true that the costs of "key management personnel" in the 2015-16 accounts are high, but comparisons with other institutions, as we've argued, are problematic.

What is revealing is that, allowing for the 50% share of the Medical School, Brighton spends in the region of £2.6 million (£3.2 million with NI and pension) on employing senior staff paid more than £100,000. Compared to last year, with adjustments to try to compare the same number of people, this has gone up by about 6.4%, whereas overall staff costs, with a similar adjustment, have gone up by 3.5%. (Without an adjustment it's 12.9% (!) compared to 5.4%).

So, even though we can't do very precise calculations, staff costs appear to have risen, largely due to the number and type of people recruited. However, the cost of senior staff has increased at double the rate. There is, of course, the obvious point that the person telling us that staff costs are too high, is paid in excess of £200,000 a year.

We have been invited to share our ideas on how the University can make savings and increase income. The obvious response from UNISON would involve a reversal of the disastrous decision over Hastings and a cap of paying anyone above a sensible limit on what people need, maybe £100,000? We could also get some of the money back that's been thrown at academies over the last few years.

Fundamentally though, making suggestions on what can be cut, is not the role of trade union members as funding from taxation is taken away. We can see the devastation that will be the result of this university going along with government policies to divide and rule across the sector and make Brighton fight for students, by attacking the terms, conditions and welfare of its own workforce.

The only way that we can secure the long term future of quality higher education at Brighton is to campaign for adequate state funding of universities, and that is what we would like this University management to do. We will be more than willing to support them in that battle.

However, a reaction to cut costs which is detrimental to our members' welfare will be resisted as strongly as we can.

NATIONAL DEMONSTRATION SATURDAY 4 MARCH 2017



12pm, Tavistock Square, London WC1 (tube: Russell Sq / Euston)
March to Parliament

UNISON will be supporting the Health Campaigns Together Demonstration "It's Our NHS!" on Saturday 4 March. Assemble Tavistock Square, London 12pm. March on to Parliament Square.

www.ournhs.info/

Hastings Campus

Over the last eighteen months or so, we have demonstrated, leafleted, argued and lobbied on numerous occasions to persuade those who make the decisions that closing the campus would be a disastrous move. Our members at Hastings, having the most to lose, have done everything possible to get the decision to go the other way, but we suspect the confused high/low aspirations at the University Board of Governors has overruled practical considerations.

The period leading up to the decision ebbed and flowed from announcing the establishment of a “centre” and endlessly repeating the phrase “commitment to the future of higher education in Hastings”, to a decision announcement, then a rewriting of history to appease UCU lawyers (“no decision has been made, anyone suggesting otherwise has got it wrong!”), then to an acceptance that the previous commitment amounted to nothing more than hoping that the FE college could make a go of it, helped with a substantial loan from the University. (Don’t mention the “financial situation”.)

What was clear was how the language changed from a “don’t worry, everything will be ok as we remodel the provision” stance, to a “sorry, but we’re going to have to close it all.” Staff at Hastings were given some hope that jobs could be transferred to the mythical “centre” or that some type of joint venture could be established, but it became clearer later on that, despite the overwhelmingly encouraging response to a fundamentally rigged consultation exercise, the campus was just going to close against the wishes of most respondents.

What’s most disappointing is that some members of the Board genuinely thought that closing the campus would solve some financial problems rather than contribute to them. This decision is totally at odds with the vision and aspirations of many of the previous managers of the University and potentially represents the largest single case of redundancies that the University of Brighton has ever made.

It’s the last thing that a trade union activist wants to have to do, but we will do what we can to make sure that all our members are represented and relocated to alternative jobs, if that is what they would like.

We as a union branch have to be clear that this was a defeat for us. We made life difficult, along the way, for those who wanted to close Hastings, but we weren’t able to prevent it happening.

It was always going to be difficult to campaign over the future of a campus miles away from most of our members and activists, and we did what we could have done under the circumstances, with the heroic help of members at Hastings who stuck their necks out as much as they could to defend their own jobs and those of others.

Next time we are threatened with such a catastrophic loss of jobs, we will have learnt some valuable lessons, which we will use to do all we can to defend our members.



UCU News



Members will have seen from the leaflets and other more direct communications (!), that our sister union, UCU, is in dispute with the University over several unconnected issues.

We do, of course, support UCU's right to take whatever action they consider appropriate in furthering the interests of their members.

We have dealt with some of the finance issues, but here's a brief summary of the current dispute.

Promotion from AC3 to AC4 has been suspended, meaning that academic staff at senior lecturer grade (AC3 or grade 8) cannot apply, as some normally would, to be promoted to principle lecturer (AC4 or grade 9). This change, depending on the number of promotions approved every year, will save very little money and will have a detrimental effect on recruitment and retention of academic staff.

As we understand it, **redundancies of academic staff at Grand Parade** are threatened. Like UCU, we always oppose compulsory redundancies and this is complicated by the "failure [of University management] to implement a workload agreement." We would hope that redundancies can be avoided with some imaginative use of redeployment and sharing out the work.

The issue of **some members of staff at Moulsecoomb being "demoted"** is the one in which we have the most stake, since there is some confusion and disagreement over contracts and the precise boundaries of teaching and support for teaching. We have always been clear that technicians, demonstrators and other members of staff who have contact time with students, should not do anything which could be treated as academic work, unless of course they are going to be paid (as a separate job) at hourly paid lecturers' rate, which includes paid time for preparation etc.

It appears that the University or managers have often looked away as our members have been asked or expected to fill in for academic work and this is unacceptable. Whilst we can't comment on specific cases which UCU are taking up, we can and will look to make sure that no academic work is done by support staff without appropriate payment and argue that technical staff have adequate time built into their workload, to prepare for any contact that they have with students.

UNISON is clear that we have to support fellow trade unionists since this underpins the principle of the trade union movement. However, we cannot declare a dispute on the basis of current UCU disagreements, and so will continue to negotiate with the University as long as that is in the best interests of our members and all support staff.



As an aside, we also expect UCU activists to respect the fact that our members have a job to do in clearing some UCU posters from walls when instructed to do so. We have also taken up some of the language used in the UCU leaflet, which suggested that some of the work done by our members was equivalent to "babysitting". UCU have taken that point and recognised that it is in the best interests of all trade unionists that we all respect the valuable work that **all of us** do for this University and its students.

This is what we're up against:

Years of organised trade unions at Brighton mean that we're not having to fight employers as bad as the ones below, but these quotes give us some idea of what some employers are thinking as they try to justify their attitudes to workers' rights and pay....

The government has published a list of the strangest excuses given by employers for failing to pay the National Minimum Wage (NMW).

The list was published last week to coincide with a new awareness campaign to encourage workers to check their pay to ensure they are receiving at least the statutory minimum ahead of the national minimum and national living wages rising on 1 April 2017.

The list of excuses included the following:

The employee wasn't a good worker so I didn't think they deserved to be paid the NMW.

I thought it was ok to pay foreign workers below the NMW as they aren't British.

The employee didn't deserve the NMW because she only makes the teas and sweeps the floors.

I've got an agreement with my workers that I won't pay them the NMW; they understand and they even signed a contract to this effect.

My workers like to think of themselves as being self-employed and the NMW doesn't apply to people who work for themselves.

My workers are often just on standby when there are no customers in the shop; I only pay them for when they're actually serving someone.

My employee is still learning so they aren't entitled to the NMW.

The NMW doesn't apply to my business.

RETIRED? STAY IN UNISON



Negotiations with University Management

One of the things we do as a union is to formally discuss with the University's management some of the issues which we want to take up on behalf of our members. We meet six times a year, twice a term, as Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC, alongside UCU) and as Support Staff Common Interest Group (SSCIG, for support staff only).

At SSCIG, we have built up a list of issues which we are discussing and we want to be able to resolve as soon as possible. Whilst many issues, as with so much at the University, take a very long time to resolve, we thought it would be worth explaining some (but not all) of the main issues which we won't stop raising without a solution:

Annual Leave Harmonisation – we have argued and management have accepted, that the current difference based on grade are illogical and potentially indirectly discriminatory, so we are trying to agree an updated system of allowances which gives everyone the same. We'll discuss at the Branch Committee what type of scheme to campaign for and make some recommendations to our Annual General Meeting.

Use of Casual Staff – we object to people being employed on a casual basis when the work that is done is regular enough to justify proper contracts. This also affects staff training and development and makes people feel less involved in the University, so we would like to see a system that guarantees hours and regular monthly payments for an annual average amount of work done.

Use of Agency Staff – this is arguably small compare to other institutions, but some people have been here for years as agency staff since it's easier to recruit from exploitative agencies that it is to give people proper jobs and employment rights. We would like all existing agency workers to be given the option of a real job and future agency usage to be limited to very short term roles with guaranteed rates of pay.

Changes to Job Descriptions – at the moment, it is only possible to change your job description with line manager support and agreement, and the re-grading process is hidden from access. We would like a proper process to allow all members of support staff to regularly review their roles so that applications for re-grades can be done smoothly and quickly, if judged appropriate by an independent group, who are trained to apply consistency between roles.

Redeployment - the current policy can resolve some issues but often people have little time or opportunity to be successfully redeployed where this is necessary. We have started to discuss the possibility of have a second tier which could allow some people to find alternative work, in order to manage problems later on. This is very pertinent given the situation faced by many people at Hastings.

A Living Wage Employer – the University has still not been willing to commit itself to join many other universities and employers by becoming an accredited living wage employer. This would currently cost very little and we will continue to press for this, as well as a reduction to the (relatively high) 37 hour working week as a commitment to the welfare of all employees.

Six Reasons to Join Your UNISON Branch:

PAY - Workers in a union are generally paid around 8% more than non-unionised workers. We negotiate nationally for pay rises and we carry more weight in those negotiations the stronger we are.

JOB SECURITY - Non-union employers are much more likely to do as they please as far as employment rights go.

HEALTH, SAFETY & WELLBEING - Union safety reps have made a positive contribution to safety at work, which matters to all of us.

LIFELONG LEARNING – Unions are keen to allow all members the opportunities which education provides.

FAIR TREATMENT – We help our members when they have problems at work, making sure that all University policies are applied properly.

LEGAL REPRESENTATION – If necessary, members are always entitled to legal help, both at work and outside of it.



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING—save the date

This is an early invite, but this year's AGM will take place during lunchtime on
Wednesday 8th March in Cockcroft Hall

You are invited to a free buffet lunch from noon, with the meeting due to start at 12.30pm.

All UNISON members have the right to attend, but please make sure you tell your manager in advance if you're coming.

Further details to follow in our next newsletter....