

UCU at University of Hertfordshire

President's report

(Keith Seed)

Introduction

My year as President was adversely affected due to serious illness which meant I was off work for a significant period of time. Branch officers, especially the Secretary (Dragan Plavsic) and the co-Vice Presidents (Dr Ed Blissett and Dr Jane Say) excelled in how they took on my duties during my absence. The following were the main issues/topics the branch dealt with during the year:

Claim for Outer London/South-East weighting allowance

UHUCU continues to press for an allowance of £3,750 per year to be paid to staff (as paid to staff at the Royal Veterinary College, Hatfield). UHUCU has received many comments from staff on how the cost of living in the South-East is a major problem for them. We have received reports of some staff using foodbanks.

The UH Strategic report and financial statement of 2022-3 shows a number of pertinent facts. UH has a £19m surplus and has had a surplus in all but one year since 2008-9. Capital expenditure continues to rise at a far greater rate proportionally to staff expenditure (see below). It is projected that £242M will be spent on capital expenditure in the next 10 years. Cash reserves and investments are £168M. The report says UH is in "good financial health". Total UH income rose by 13% and is at its highest ever at £383M. Significantly, beneath "Key Risk indicators" and "Red (significant risk)" in the report is "Failure to recruit, maintain and ensure wellbeing of staff".

UHUCU has therefore made the case to management that the "good financial health" of UH means it can afford to pay an Outer London/South-East weighting allowance. The payment of the allowance will significantly help with concerns over staff recruitment, retention and wellbeing.

UH-wide workload model

UHUCU continues to negotiate with management on a new UH-wide workload model being prepared by management. UHUCU has secured agreement from management that local and national agreements with UCU and individual staff contracts of employment will be adhered to in any new workload model. A number of other specific concerns have been raised and are currently being discussed and negotiated. Following our interventions, the new workload framework will be tested, as a paper exercise, retrospectively on the previous year's workload, rather than introduced as a 'pilot' in three schools.

Equate

Following many members continuing to inform us that they consider Equate to be unfair, unwieldy and time consuming, UHUCU has continued to argue for its replacement. UHUCU has two branch officers on a UH working group set up to consider the future of Equate.

Industrial Relations at UH

Following concerns over industrial relations between UHUCU and management, UHUCU tasked Dr Ed Blissett (co-Vice President) with improving them. It is felt Ed has significantly improved industrial relations and communication links between management and UHUCU, securing concessions on the UH-wide workload model (see above) and on these issues:

1. Marking assessment boycott (MAB) - following Ed's negotiations with the DVC, UH reversed its policy of deducting 100% of pay for those taking part in the MAB. UH was one of the few universities where such a management policy was reversed.
2. Initial proposals by management to alter the redundancy and redeployment agreements detrimentally were withdrawn.
3. A new collective agreement has been reached over how new UPRs and collective agreements are to be negotiated.
- 4 Negotiations have commenced with management on a "regional allowance" for staff.
5. UHUCU has always had a very good relationship with Unison at UH and this has been further strengthened. Ed led the successful joint UCU/Unison claim to have the bar removed for professional staff.

Christmas bonus

Following our representations on the high cost of living crisis facing staff, the Christmas bonus was more than doubled to £500.

Re-balancing expenditure on buildings and staff

Compared to the previous year, the 2022-3 UH strategic report showed a 40% increase in capital expenditure but only a 8% increase in expenditure on staff. UHUCU continues to press management to recognise that staff are its greatest asset and that a better balance needs to be found between capital expenditure and staff expenditure.

Pay ratio

UHUCU's position that UH should have a pay ratio of 10 to 1 continues to be pushed. Currently UH has no ceiling or floor on a pay ratio. Figures based (and with the help of HR) on the 2022-3 UH Strategic report show the total remuneration ratio is just under 18 to 1 (17.97 to 1). The highest paid UH employee having a total remuneration of £375,000 per year and the lowest paid full-time employee having a total remuneration of £20,863. The median total remuneration ratio is 9.45. The basic pay remuneration ratio is 16.79. The basic pay of the highest paid UH employee is £312,000 per year the basic pay of the lowest paid UH employee is £18,582. The median basic pay ratio is 8.69.

Hot desking/secure storage of equipment etc

Following the move to hot desking, UHUCU continues to raise concerns over the lack of suitable work and storage space at UH for staff despite the significant rise in capital expenditure. In particular, UHUCU has been seeking secure 24 hour storage facilities for staff. In particular, UHUCU has been seeking secure 24 hour storage facilities for staff to enable efficient working on campus and to avoid staff commuting with expensive laptops and other work items which also carry potential data protection risks. UHUCU is currently in dialogue with management about this issue.

Fairness and equality at UH

UHUCU has raised concerns over the gender, ethnicity etc pay gaps and other equality issues. The results of the November 2023 UH staff survey showed UH to be minus 7 to the national higher educational institution (HEI) average on whether “The university treats people fairly and equally”.

UH senior leadership listening and responding to the views of staff

UHUCU has raised concerns that the November 2023 staff survey result showed UH is minus 15 to the national HEI average on whether “The university’s leadership team (Vice Chancellor’s Executive) listens to and responds to the views of staff”.

UH Strategic Plan 2025-30

UHUCU has informed management that it would like to see goals/targets in place in the strategic plan: for an Outer London/South-East weighting allowance (of £3,750 per annum – see above); for a new system to replace Equate; for future staff survey scores given the disappointing results in the November 2023 staff survey on Fairness and Equality and Leadership (Vice Chancellor’s Executive listening and responding to staff views); for taking meaningful steps to reach the 2020-25 strategic plan target for staff feeling “safe to speak up” given the score in the November 2023 UH staff survey was below the national HEI average with only 47% of staff saying they felt “safe to speak up” at UH. The 47% “safe to speak up” score is minus 13 to the target in the 2020-5 strategic plan. UHUCU also expects to see aims/targets set in place by management to provide the resources/staff/fair pay etc so UH can climb up from its disappointing 83rd place in the 2024 Complete University Guide.

Israel/Gaza

UHUCU supported national UCU’s call for a ceasefire.

Parking

UHUCU continues to press management to make all staff parking free.

Branch issues/miscellaneous

UHUCU continues to ask members to come forward and act as school reps and branch officers. Our website and communications on X (twitter) continue to be highly effective communication tools. Despite our strained resources, UHUCU continues, every week, to answer queries and concerns from members and to represent them in disputes with management. Numerous individual members grievances have been successfully prosecuted and members successfully defended from disciplinary action.

Finally, and sadly, a big thank you

Dr Ed Blissett, Dr Martina Doolan and Dr Lindsey German have decided to stand down from the branch committee. I thank them for their excellent past work and service for the union.

Keith Seed

June 27 2024