



Our newsletter is free to all members.

If you're not a member, we need you to join now!

Fill in a paper form or join online. Just ask a steward or follow the link from Staff Central.

University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

January 2020

A Happy New Year to you all!

The first newsletter of the decade includes articles on what the future might hold for higher education. There's plenty of speculation to be had given the result of the election and what the new government will want to do, or not do.

We also feature articles on voluntary severance, Securing our Future, the latest with the pay dispute and what we want in terms of demonstrator contracts.

As always, please let us know if there's anything you want to ask a question about or take issue with.

If you're inspired to write an article for a future issue then feel free to let us have it. We'll print anything from our members as long as it's relevant, appropriate and not offensive.

Also, please save the date - **Thursday 5th March 2020, for the Annual General Meeting**, which will be over lunchtime at Cockcroft Hall. We'll also hold meetings at other sites around that date for those who can't easily travel between campuses.

Thanks for reading!

Ivan, Branch Secretary



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What does the future hold for Higher Education?

With the election of a majority Conservative government, you would think it would be clearer to predict what's going to happen in relation to tuition fees, research funding and government higher education policy generally, but sadly, it's still not clear where this is going.

Obviously Brexit is going to dominate still, but the government's response to the Augar Review is what's going to have a major impact on universities, especially if the level of the tuition fee is reduced.

Augar recommended that the tuition fee for full time undergraduates be reduced to £7,500, based on what they'd apparently calculated (or just made up) as the cost for classroom based teaching. This suggests that additional funding would be provided by the government for science and higher-cost subjects, but it's anyone's guess what that would be and how it would be applied. Even if the additional funding were to make up to fee to £9,250 for some courses (itself a real-terms cut given the lack of an inflationary increase), this would still mean a significant cut in income for all institutions. (Actually Brighton would be hit less hard in relative terms due to the balance of science courses in relation to arts, social science and humanities, but that's not much comfort for a university which is already planning significant cuts.)



Augar aims to reduce the overall cost to the government of the student finance system. Part of this plan is that students should pay back their loans over a longer timescale of forty years!

Now it could be that all this is kicked down the road for a bit, but I suspect that the government will be keen to reduce the amount of money flowing to universities and do whatever they can to make that happen. This could mean a major attack on universities to carry on as normal, as some institutions cannot cope with a forced reduction in fee income of millions and cannot recruit enough students (who would get a terrible experience) to compensate.

Would Brighton be in that category?

Probably, yes. This university would certainly struggle in that situation and it's unlikely that this government would worry too much if some of the universities at the wrong end of the league tables started to indicate that their ability to function as a going concern might be coming to an end.

That doesn't mean that we should expect things to get worse, but being prepared for further attacks on higher education (at least for those of us outside the Russell Group) would make sense.

One thing the election cleared up is that there's now no hope in waiting for a Corbyn-led government to solve our problems in the short term. Trade unionists have to rely on our own strength to defend our jobs and working conditions alongside fighting for a decent higher education system for all.

We'd hope that at the first sign of government attacks, we will be able to campaign alongside the University's management, but if that's not possible and those cuts are dutifully passed on, then we will do our best to resist them.

Voluntary Severance, Again

Many University workers will be concerned but not surprised that voluntary severance is open for applications again. This time, it goes much further in that pretty much all restrictions on who can make an application have been removed, with only a small group of support staff being told that this does not apply to them.

What this means is that there are a sizable group of people who have never been asked before and who will be tempted to leave. Of course that doesn't mean that they will all go, because whether an application is approved or not will depend on the university assessment of:

- Whether they think they can manage without you (!)
- Whether they think they can get somebody else to do your work
- How much it's going to cost to pay you off, relative to how much they'll save

If you've been here a while and many of those years were when you were over 41 then it's likely to be a tempting offer, but you need to think about what you're going to do in the future. If you can take your pension early then that might be an option, but if you can't then you'll probably need to get another job or have some sort of plan which won't leave you destitute. Leaving a job voluntarily could mean that claiming benefits is not that straightforward.

As a trade union, it's not our role to help people leave their jobs. We're here to defend the jobs of those who want them and campaign for better working conditions for us all.

However, we recognise that people will be interested in finding out if they would be allowed to go in exchange for a cash payment, so **we would advise anyone who is interested to apply by the 15th January deadline.** (You can always change your mind later and you're not committing yourself to anything until you sign the agreement in March. Other things may be much clearer by then.)

UNISON Advice

We aren't qualified to give financial or careers advice to our members, so all we can do is suggest that you think carefully if you are ultimately going to take their offer.

What we can do for our members is provide legal representation which you need to have if you're about to sign the form, later in March. You can just as easily get a high street solicitor to do this for you as long as they're not too expensive. It is important to appreciate though that these people will not advise you about whether to accept or not, their role is to make sure you understand what you're potentially agreeing to. Whether you go or not is your decision.

If you do apply and are successful i.e. the ironically named Recruitment Authorisation Group agree to accept your application then you can send the agreements to us, if you are a member and want us to sort out the legal advice. We'll give further details on how to do that later.

The Aftermath

For those of us not leaving, the issue is who's doing the work. If large groups of people go then the work they were doing has to cease. If our members are expected to cover for absent colleagues then this isn't acceptable and we'll look to be clear about a continuation of workload and responsibilities for the vast majority of staff members who are still here on 1st August.

Securing Our Future

The title given to this project has been carefully chosen to give the impression that if we i.e. the “University community” don’t do something then we might not have a future. Clearly whose future that is depends on who is still here for the second part of 2020. Some of us won’t be.

There are a lot of questions raised by what’s been “delivered so far” by the Securing Our Future Board.

A £7 million income shortfall last financial year has been “addressed” by “reducing central strategic contingency budgets and slowing down internal investment programmes.”

£7 million is a colossal amount of income to have lost. That’s the equivalent of over 750 full time undergraduates. Was it really that bad?

Also, reducing a budget is not the same as saving money. You save money by not spending funds which you had planned to. Tinkering around with budgets which were never likely to be spent does not equate to savings. The University for the first time in many years, ended up with a £4.8 million deficit last year. I’m sure the narrative will be that without the SOF project, it would have been a lot worse.



For this year, “progress” has been to identify cost savings:

VSS will save £3.9 million, apparently. Is it me, or can you see potential problems with this?

£3.7 million will be saved with reductions to school budgets. Is that 12 schools or 7 schools?

The “good news” is that the buildings at Hastings have either been sold or are “in the process” of being sold i.e. what we’d call, for sale. For those who have witnessed the demise of Hastings over the last four years, we can see the irony of celebrating the sale of buildings which used to house the students, which in turn, generated the income before the decision to close it. Coincidentally, the £7m shortfall in 2018-19 was not far off what the Hastings students were generating.

All these proposed savings for this year are of course overlapping with a different set of numbers, which are the savings due to be made by the three or four (or five depending on who you ask) SOF workstreams which are all going to deliver savings.

However you dress this up to present it, the reality is that many jobs will need to go (if not voluntarily then compulsorily) to achieve these saving targets.

If the project sticks to the timescale, by the end of January, two weeks after the VSS deadline, we should be presented with “detailed plans”, which we can’t honestly see seamlessly fitting into the VS timescale since the VS process depends on people sticking with an application that may have been made speculatively.

Either way, we’re in for a turbulent six months, which, if compulsory redundancies are proposed, will probably be the first time we’ve balloted our members locally for some time.

This was the UNISON response to Schools Size and Shape and Academic Services review

Size And Shape

Benefits and Challenges

We recognise that falling student numbers does suggest it makes sense to reduce the overall number of schools, but if this is based on a long-term projection then it feels like we're accepting that the University is going to shrink (or has done already) and then remain at that size in later years. This proposal makes no sense if there's going to be a review in 2023-24 about having more schools.

A reduction in the number of schools is potentially a very one-sided approach to having fewer students. Logically, a reduction in the number of students should mean a programme of consistent downsizing which would affect all schools and departments. Consolidating the schools will not, at this stage, affect the number of courses or the administration required to manage them. (Maybe a reduction in the number of courses offered is a later stage plan?)

The only tasks which can justifiably be scaled back are those directly relating to the number of students. This has to be seen against the need to improve student facilities (to improve the NSS) and welfare (to fulfil the University's obligation to provide an adequate duty of care). If anything, these services should be enhanced.

The benefits of having fewer schools would be that money could be saved by having fewer heads. Reducing the number of administrative staff makes no practical sense unless their volume of work is driven by student numbers and we expect that reduction to be permanent.

Choosing not to reduce the number of courses should, arguably, improve student experience since class sizes and staff/student ratios will improve.

If the argument is that fewer schools allows more efficiency, since fewer staff are required to carry out the school tasks then we would reject this argument.

One of the challenges (or reasons for not making any changes) would be the colossal investment in time and resources to carry out the changes properly. Signage, Sharepoint sites, offices etc. will all need to be reconfigured, which will create massive workloads for some people when we're supposed to be saving money. We already have an additional role in HR to manage this, but it's important to appreciate that fundamental changes are very time-consuming and when details are missed it makes the University look amateur. (I think there are still signs in Cockcroft referring to Faculties.)

If this can be carried out without compulsory redundancies then we're reasonably comfortable with the concept, but of course the whole point of this is to save money. We are opposed to any changes designed to get fewer staff to do more work, and we will consult our members over any attempt to impose job losses.

Subject Groupings

We don't have any strong views on this, provided technical staff are comfortable with the splits and that this structure does away with individuals having to straddle schools to allow for historical issues not properly dealt with.

It does make sense to aim for schools to be based on a single site where this is practical, but people should not be moved to achieve this. Perhaps this should be a longer term aspiration.

Naming Convention

We think having “School of...” makes more sense than retaining historical anomalies, but why not allow the proposed staff and students in each school to democratically decide what the schools should be called? Many members of staff are tired of having changes imposed on them without any say.

Academic Services

Campus Student Centres & Digital Services

Any improvement which involves both school offices and campus offices/digital services needs to clarify who’s doing what. Students potentially will get very confused if there’s an overlap.

We think both are required, but with a clear distinction of the school offices being the students’ direct link to the academic issues relating to their course and the student centres being for everything else.

We don’t understand how student centres could become a single point of access for students. Many queries require detailed knowledge of the student’s course and therefore need to be referred to a school administrator. Is the plan to physically expand the student centres, with all school admin staff moved to a campus student centre? We don’t think there is space for this in the current student centres. It would be better to ensure that student-facing staff are fully trained in how to access different services, and to take responsibility for getting the student to the appropriate place.

Digital services have a significant role, but it is also important that students are able to access face to face services, particularly given current issues around student mental health and the focus on improving the student experience. It is also important for schools to have defined social spaces for their students as this builds a sense of community for the school. (This is currently lacking at the Falmer campus).

If the school offices are important to the students then they need to be visible and have fully staffed, professional reception areas to manage all queries and not just during office hours. (This is not the job of caretakers!) If the schools are split site, there should be more than one school office. Digital services should be consistent across sites, clear about what services they offer and not unnecessarily duplicate what schools provide.

University Wide Services

It makes practical sense to centralise services where this can improve the quality and consistency of the service provided, bearing in mind that the students may well prefer that service to be managed locally in the school. Have we asked them about this? Are we proposing to make changes where there’s evidence that the students would see an improvement in their experience of the University.

We do not accept the false assumption that there is duplication on a mass scale, often used to justify redundancies. (There may not be duplication, but there are significantly more senior staff here than there were ten years ago. What are they duplicating? Meetings about more meetings?) What there may be, is localised differences of approach, which may be the result of historical cultural difference between schools, or may be driven by local conditions, or by national constraints, such as regulatory bodies.

Insisting that services need to be centralised without good reason is even more problematic at a University which is geographically dispersed, but where this makes sense then it should be considered. Of course the best people to advise on this would be those currently providing each service.

It is necessary to design clear and unambiguous policies and processes, provide training in these to central and school staff, and ensure that there is capacity and resources to carry these out. In many areas, this is already happening, but many problems arise when there's a culture of some schools doing their own thing and not following what's necessary for central teams to be able to do their work efficiently. Having the procedures on paper does not necessarily mean that the agreed procedures are followed.

As we've mentioned, there are clear cases of where there are specialist needs as a result of regulatory bodies etc., but we can't have a situation where every school is a special case and heads of schools need to make sure that agreed procedures are followed properly, rather than creating inconsistency between schools for cultural reasons.

School Based Administration

Programme administrators should remain within the schools and close to the students and academic staff. However, we think there are important tasks that should be managed centrally and consistently, for example raising tuition fees, confirming student attendance with the Student Loans Company and dealing with the Home Office.

Generally speaking, we would support the principle of tasks closely related to the students' courses being retained within the schools. Administrative staff who work closely with academics (research administrators etc.) should also retain that relationship by being school-based members of staff.

We think the School Office structure also has benefits for staff career development, as this allows for more varied roles and therefore a more interesting job with more opportunities for career progression. Staff progressing in their careers may also have a positive impact on the University's finances as there are fewer staff sitting at the top of their grade.

If, as a result of this, there is an expectation of people being required to move work location, then care should be taken to make sure that this is done sensitively and in a way that does not mean that people are just dumped into unsuitable offices with little coordination with the very hard pushed space management team. There's also a need to coordinate this change very carefully so that processes work together from 1st August 2020 and things don't get missed or done differently by multiple people.

We're also concerned that if there is any change in what academic staff expect, in relation to administrative support, then there is some proper consultation and effective communication to support this.

One of the main causes of work related stress is people being put into impossible or awkward situations where the expectations of colleagues is totally different to what their job description suggests they should be doing.



Demonstrator Contracts

You may remember that UCU took strike action a few years ago after it emerged that students were being employed as “hourly-paid demonstrators”. After much discussion about what constitutes a demonstrator as opposed to a lecturer, which involved a consultant to look into the issue, the University conceded that these people were in fact teaching, and therefore should have been paid as hourly-paid lecturers. UCU one, University nil.

Part of the agreement struck between UCU and the University was a commitment to look at the role of demonstrators and be clear about the dividing line between what’s deemed to be teaching (done by employees on academic contracts) and what’s demonstrating (delivered by support staff at a range of grades, typically grade 4 or 5.)

Obviously this is complicated and not helped by the terminology. There’s also the history of different schools managing their technical staff in ways which are appropriate to their subject areas. Arts-based schools have many technical demonstrators, who are highly skilled and specialised, and deliver specific instruction and guidance on how to use equipment safely and to the best of its capability, so that the student can express their ideas. Science technicians (some of whom are “technical instructors”) train students in equipment usage which should sit outside the scope of teaching, but the use of that equipment and technique is an essential part of the competence required to successfully graduate. There are also many IT and media technicians in schools and Information Services for which student contact is a significant part of their role



The University would like to see a standardisation of the demonstrator job description, which we’re not necessarily opposed to, provided that the affected people are happy. What we would also like to see though is a commitment to addressing the significant workload pressures at specific points of the year which mean that the student experience suffers when staff struggle to cope with the volumes of students requiring instruction and training.

Since academic staff have a universal agreement on student contact time, we think technical staff should have a similar framework which allow technicians and demonstrators a more reasonable workload and allow for preparation time.

We’d also like to see “hourly-paid demonstrators” only used where appropriate, and for some clear agreement about what situations would justify this.

All this comes about at a time when the University have signed up to the Technician Commitment after supporting the Technicians Make It Happen campaign.

Technician Commitment

We support this initiative and hope that it can improve the working lives of all technical staff, based on the four key areas: Visibility, Recognition, Career Development and Sustainability.

If you have any comments or questions about what we’re doing then please feel free to get in touch.

Pay Dispute Latest

The dispute over the 2019-20 pay increase continues with the unions talking to UCEA (the employers' body) and apparently making some progress over pay equality, workload and job security, but with no discussion over pay. UCEA initially insisted that they did not have a mandate to discuss increasing the 1.8% offer (which was imposed), but are now apparently going to return to all Vice-Chancellors to see if they can move on this.

Inevitably, this will produce a mixed picture, but I suspect that some will say absolutely not, some will say ok then but we'll need to cut jobs and some will say please just give them a bit more if it means they'll call off the strikes.

If there isn't significant progress with this, UCU are due to strike again in February, with a planned escalation of strike days, in addition to the existing situation where UCU members are working to rule.

Meanwhile, talks are due to take place to resolve the USS pension dispute, so it's possible that this comes to an end before the one over pay etc.

It goes without saying that we're fully behind UCU and if they strike again then we'll do everything we legally can to give them our support.

We'll let you know more when we do.



UNISON Higher Education Conference

On 16th January, six members of our branch committee will be attending the annual conference of all higher education branches in Milton Keynes. We're very pleased to be taking an active role in framing our union's higher education policy once again and our two delegates will move our two motions and one amendment to a motion, which are on the agenda. These address pay ballot tactics, tackling low pay and also raise the possibility of a high-cost pay weighting for the South East and other regions where the cost of living matches or comes close to that of London.

If you want to find out more, details are on UNISON's national website.

www.unison.org.uk/events/

We'll give you a full report of what happened next month.

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Are you on a low income? Help is on hand

There for You has set up a limited fund to help UNISON members. If your net income is £18,000 or less you may be eligible to receive a grant of £40.

To apply and download the application form visit unison.org.uk/thereforyou or simply contact UNISON Direct 0800 0857 857 between 6am-midnight Mon-Fri and 9am-4pm Sat.

Closing date for receipt of applications is **Friday 14 February 2020**.

NOTE: The £18,000 net income applies only to the There for You small grants programme. Any member who is struggling financially due to an unexpected crisis should either contact their branch welfare officer, call us on

020 7121 5620 or visit www.unison.co.uk/thereforyou for more information.

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the public service union

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