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University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

May 2020

As I write this, it's now six full weeks since the University decided that Friday 20th March would be the last day many of us would see our workplaces for an unspecified amount of time.

Looking back to that point, it now seems surreal, and with the benefit of hindsight, many of us would probably have grabbed more stuff than we did. None of us really had much of a clue about how long this was going to last, and we now all have differing opinions about what the immediate and medium-term future of higher education looks like.

Of course not everyone has been at home for all this time. Some staff have been on site, dealing with security and the welfare of those students still living in halls and sorting out the necessary services - payroll, laptop and furniture loans etc. . We have to accept that the University

are taking the safety of all those working on site seriously, with appropriate protection and distancing in place.

For those at home, how you've dealt with this depends on your circumstances. We've talked at length to H&S professionals about the best way to make sure people are staying safe, but the clear message from your union is that you can and should only do that amount of work with which you feel comfortable. You are best placed to decide what you can manage, given all the other issues you have to deal with. Please seek out help if you need it and remember your manager has a duty of care for you, which they should be pro-active about exercising.

Please stay safe and look after yourselves.

Ivan Bonsell, Branch Secretary

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Furloughing

Under the government's scheme to avoid mass redundancies, it is possible for universities to furlough members of staff. This means effectively being told to not worry about working for a certain period of time. The university claims 80% of the cost of employing you, but has agreed to pay your wages and pension contributions in full.

At the moment, final touches are being put in place for the scheme to happen soon. Obviously it makes no sense for the government to part-fund wages which are paid for from government-backed student loans, so this scheme is only available where the jobs are seen to be funded from commercial activity.

This limits things quite a bit. In reality, to the jobs which have a defined income stream from outside the University.

Clearly there will be people who are not furloughed because they don't fit the criteria, but the effect is still the same if the work isn't there as a result of circumstances.

Whether you are furloughed or not, there's no need to be overly concerned about the process. If the work isn't there then nobody is expecting you to do any. If you are concerned, then please feel free to get in touch.

Annual Leave

There's been a lot of discussion about leave and the government's relaxing of the rules over what can be carried forward into a future leave year.

The University's leave year ends on 31st August and it's fairly normal for many people to take large chunks of annual leave in August, because it's a quiet time for school-based staff or because it's required to part-cover childcare. By this time of year, many of us will have more leave accrued than we've taken.

Given the situation, many people with leave booked or planned will not have taken it since it's not been required for childcare or there haven't exactly been that many opportunities to do anything interesting. It makes sense to not take leave if you were using it to go away or because you need to care for children.

The University's leave rules are that you can't carry more than five full days of leave forward into September - you need to take it all by the end of August or lose it.

Normally we'd be fully supportive of this principle. Leave should be taken regularly to give you a rest, physically and emotionally from the pressure of work. From a mental wellbeing point of view, it's important to get away and remind yourself that there's more to life.

That said, we recognise that if your opportunities are limited, taking leave to sit at home is less attractive.

The Covid-19 crisis has pushed the government to pass a not very well written piece of legislation, which is clearly designed for people working in health and social care whose expertise is urgently required. The national rules now say that people can carry forward more leave to the next year (from April 2020 for most) since the shortage of people able to work should not be reduced further by people taking leave.

(Employing enough people in the first place would obviously be a better plan, but that would make the service less attraction for private contracts and eat into further tax cuts for the rich.)

So the legislation makes it technically possible to carry forward more than the five days, but it would need to be *“not reasonably practicable for a worker to take some or all of the leave to which the worker was entitled...as a result of the effects of coronavirus.”* In practical terms, you would need to effectively agree with your manager that you would not take all your leave before the end of August because the crisis makes it “not reasonably practicable”.

Whilst this scenario is not impossible for those of us at the University, it’s much less likely to happen.

It’s difficult for us to argue that people should not take their leave because they want to save it for more interesting times, but we recognise that many won’t want to take leave now to stare at four walls.

We’re hoping that many managers will continue to do what they have done for years - allow people to unofficially carry forward more than five days on the basis that it suits both parties. We don’t expect to see a clamping down on enforcement more than we have in the past, just because it’s topical.

However, please make sure you’re taking the leave to which you are entitled and if you don’t feel able to then that probably suggests you’re working too hard. Please follow our guidance - work as much as you feel able to, and use your annual leave, which generations of trade unionists have fought for us all to have.



Returning to work?

Many of us are now used to working from home, in spite of all the issues and problems we’re having to deal with. As the government debates what to do to deal with their main concern (the economic situation , rather than the safety of the British public), it is possible that there may be a drift back to the workplaces of university workers not already on site.

For us, the safety of the workforce, students and everyone we come into contact with is the most important factor. We don’t think anyone should be on site, or even leaving their homes unless the risk to their welfare has been adequately assessed and managed.

It’s not just a case of what you do when you get to work, it’s how you’re going to get there that also matters. Many of our buildings are built to just about accommodate large groups of students studying in or moving between classrooms, labs and workshops. Physical distancing is pretty much ruled out without a significant reduction of numbers of people and some sort of one-way system in place, rendering many of the spaces unsuitable for work and study.

Whilst there’s little to be gained endlessly speculating about this, it’s clear that without the students physically on campus or research taking place, there’s generally not much need for many of us to be there. If there is a plan for face-to-face study being reinstated for October, or even January 2021, it will be necessary to consider which individual members of staff need to be on site and should be on site given their individual circumstances.

Our role as trade unionists is to make sure that no safety measures are compromised and that people are not expected to do anything with which they have concerns.

This experience has changed the way we operate, perhaps for good and this could be incorporated into a new work-life balance plan, which would benefit us all.

Campaign for Higher Education

The government's current refusal to properly manage the potential shortfall of students this Autumn is going to be a disaster for higher education. Whilst it's not possible to fully predict the effects in advance, it's likely that many universities will suffer major financial issues and some may cease to be solvent.

As the Economist put it:

"On April 29th Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, told MPs that his priorities were protecting research, students and the role universities have in local economies—which sounds like a reference to the need to look after poorer places. Those aims will have to be squared with the Treasury's pressing need to save money and the government's ambition to squeeze waste out of the sector. It sounds like universities with poor graduate prospects in richer parts of the country should be worried."

This is not a threat we can ignore. We've teamed up with activists across the country and our branch will be playing a part in a campaign to save higher education from disaster. We'll let you know more details soon.



Labour Party Issues

Many members will be concerned about the information contained in the leaked internal Labour Party report over the party's dealing with allegations of anti-Semitism. This apparently showed the undermining of Jeremy Corbyn by Labour officials, some of whom now hold leading paid positions within UNISON.

An open letter to Dave Prentis, General Secretary of UNISON, has been signed by over 1,600, including 26 National Executive Council members, which argues for the union leadership to "address this, [and for a] root and branch cultural change within UNISON."

You can find the open letter here:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScDWsxeRjYKmjVoZLmOosTIFiTbe8Re7b939meM5h7bipfTMw/viewform>