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If you're not a member, we want you to join us.

You can still join UNISON easily on-line.

Just follow the link from our blog on Staff Central.

University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

July 2020

The worldwide Covid-19 pandemic continues to have an effect on the working lives of us all, and this is set to last well into the new academic year.

Many of our members are now being asked to return to work on site, mainly to prepare for the arrival of students completing practical assessments or portfolios, or to play a part in the Clearing process, which is a crucial activity in making sure that the University has enough students for the coming year.

As the government guidelines start to ease, the University is looking at the initial measures put in place to manage the emergency situation in March and there's likely to be some revision of what people are expected to do.

For us, the safety and welfare of our members is the most important principle, and we're currently saying that anyone being asked to work on-site should be physically and mentally happy to do so. We're also saying that people who remain working

at home should be expected to do the best they can, since many will still be managing the challenge of childcare.

There are many different possibilities, depending on the nature of the job role and the personal circumstances of each individual, but in all cases, the University's duty of care extends to the reasonableness of what they're expecting you to do.

A trade union is not, and never has been, a club for lazy workers. Our members have worked harder than ever before to keep the University functioning in the most difficult circumstances.

It's important to recognise that all our members have differing challenges and the University has to take all of this into account over the next few months.

If you have any particular worries or concerns, please feel free to get in touch.

Ivan Bonsell, Branch Secretary

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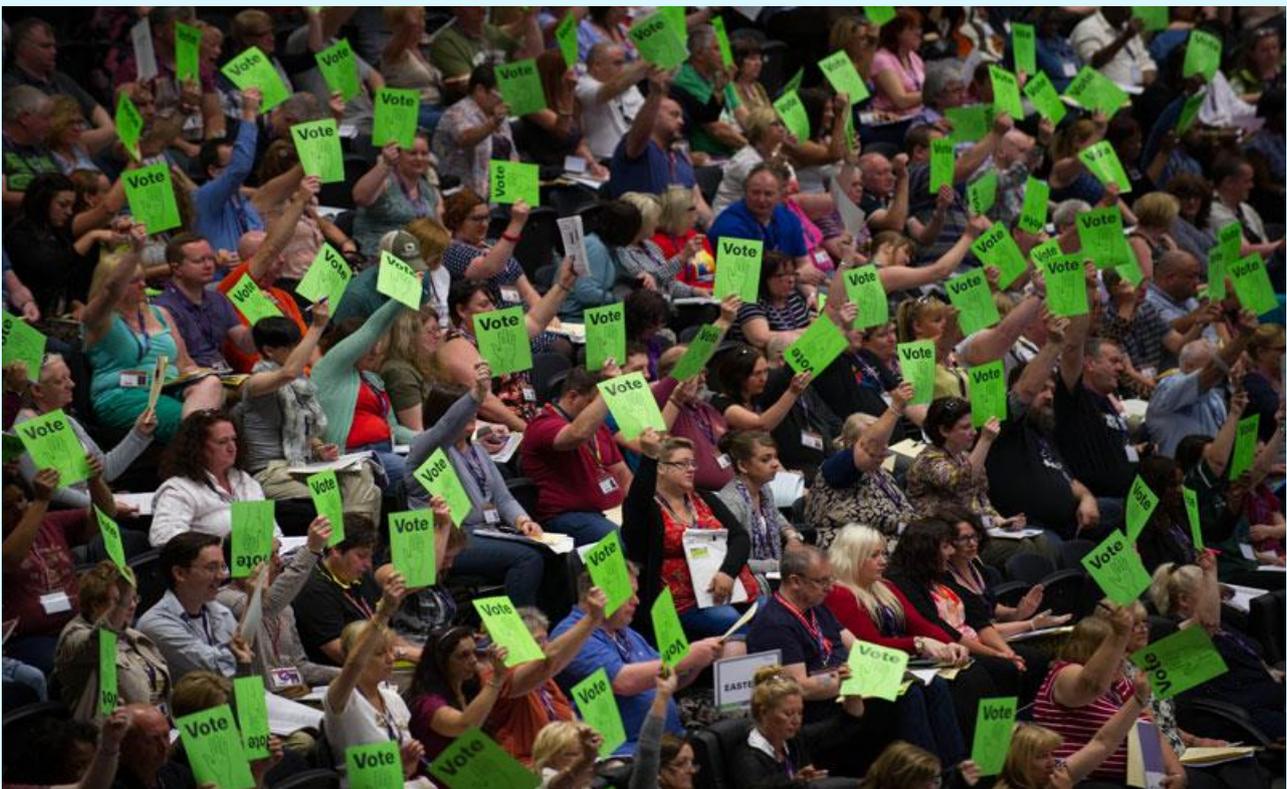
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All-Member Meetings

The coronavirus lockdown and enforced working from home situation of many of our members has opened up new opportunities for organising our branch. Under normal circumstances, when we have organised physical meetings, attendance has always been affected by the time of day and the geography of the University.

With the changed circumstances, we can now hold meetings through Teams which many more of our members can attend. It's also arguably easier to participate, either verbally or through the chat function. The new possibilities for trade union democracy and member-engagement are obvious.

We have now hosted three such meetings with a limited group one followed by two where all members were invited. They have been so successful, with good feedback on their usefulness, that we're going to make them a regular event, at least as long as many of our members are working remotely.



One of the issues with large on-line meetings is that it's not as easy to see who's there, but some would argue that an electronic list of participants is easier than scanning a large meeting room. The meetings are open to all members, we have members across all schools, departments and grades, and it would be inappropriate to hand-pick which ones we invite to our meetings (!) so we need to remind people that everyone else can hear what you're saying or read what you're writing in the chat.

This shouldn't be a problem, because we know our members are careful to act professionally and respect the views of others, but the golden rule is that you should never put something in writing that you're not happy with everyone else across the University being able to read.

If you want some idea of what was discussed at the meetings we've had so far, you can see the chat in the Team, which you can join using the code sent out to members via email.

Our next meeting will be on Thursday 30th July at 2pm. All welcome!

PAY Latest

As you may have heard, UCEA, the employers' organisation, has not altered its initial "offer" of a pay freeze from 1st August. I suppose this offer is not as bad as a reduction in wages, although we all know that in real terms, it is.

UNISON have made it clear that we've rejected it and UNISON's national body will meet in the middle of July to decide what to do next.

Many will argue that our members are more concerned with having a job than campaigning for better wages, but we'd argue that we have to do both.

If the 2020 round of recruitment is not a disaster (and there's evidence to suggest that initial worries might have been unfounded) then universities should be able to maintain wages in line with inflation and retain the staff they have. Whether an institution can or cannot afford a pay rise is not the issue for us, but whether the government is going to fund higher education properly.

Our demand for decent wages is not so much about what our VC will do but more to do with how universities are funded as an essential public service.

We've also not forgotten about the demand for a 35 hour week. We think 37 hours a week is outdated and successive pay settlements have supposed to mean that universities signed up to national pay bargaining are working towards a standardisation of hours at 35, with no loss in pay. We think this could be introduced relatively easily.

We're also committed to the standardisation of annual leave. Different grades and contracts are paid at different rates due to the nature of the work. There is no justification for different grades receiving different annual leave allowances. A professor does different work from a cleaner or a programme administrator. All deserve annual leave for rest and recuperation, but there's no reason for there to be a difference other than what trade unions have managed to secure by struggling for it in the past. Differences in holiday allowance are almost certainly going to be skewed in favour of white men. It's time this changed to 35 days for all.

Don't fail our public services
Don't fail our economy
Don't fail our students
Don't fail our staff
Don't fail our future.



Please have a look at UNISON's national campaign to defend higher education:

<https://www.unison.org.uk/our-campaigns/protect-higher-education/>

Health and Safety Issues

The University is looking at a return to campus and what this might look like.

Of course we know that there are people who have not been away, but many people have been working from home because that's been the safety requirement of the situation. As the summer progresses, steps have been taken to get some people back on site, to manage students completing essential activity (or maybe not really that essential) and the clearing operation between now and the end of August.

Essential for us is that nobody is required to return to work on site unless they are willing and able to do so. This is where it gets complicated.

If your line manager insists that you need to return to work then this currently goes against what has been verbally agreed.

From August, assuming of course that other external and national issues are not going to override this, the situation in relation to shielding will change. This could mean that people who have been required to stay away from work for all kinds of medical and health reasons will have their situation reassessed,

Obviously, all this depends on the nature of your work. Many of our members can and will stay away from office-based work until the new academic year. The more immediate issue relates to people for whom some or part of their work involves being on site. As a rough guide, this is going to be estates staff (many of whom have not been away) technicians, library staff, those involved in clearing (although this is temporary until the end of August) and a whole load of people required to make the university ready for whatever is in place when the students come back.

We're anticipating a massive volume of discussions with line managers about what individuals are capable of doing, both at home and on-site, taking into account health situations, childcare, travel arrangements and potential exposure to the disease requiring testing and isolation. Many people will be suffering emotionally with the idea of returning, for many complicated reasons.

If you feel that you're being asked to do something you don't feel able to, then please get in touch with us. We can't solve all the problems, but we can make the case for the University to stick to what's reasonable given all the complications of Covid and the endlessly changing situation.

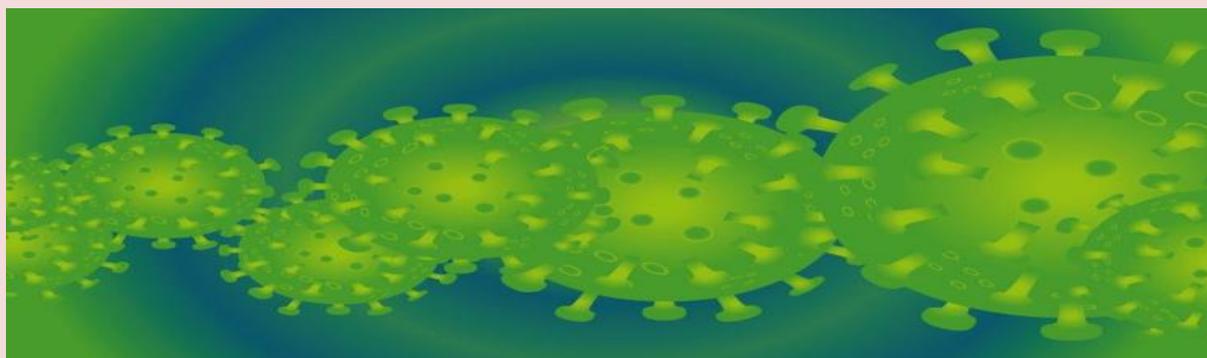
If you currently expected to return to working on site, even for just the odd day, it's important that you are shown and read the relevant risk assessment for the activity you're required to do. Nobody should be on campus without the relevant risk assessment which should have been signed off by a senior manager or someone delegated with the responsibility for your safety.

As the situation develops, some will say that the danger has gone and others will say that the danger is just as high as it was in March. Neither are true, but the University still has a duty of care for us all, which extends to physical and emotional safety.

It's not too much to ask that the University and its management takes into account the fact that we all want to feel safe at work and that our welfare at all times is managed appropriately.

If you're asked to return to work on campus....

- ◇ Has your manager explained how your work is essential and cannot be done remotely?
- ◇ Is there time and number of days you're being asked to work on site reasonable under the circumstances?
- ◇ Have you read and understood the risk assessment for the activity and has it been signed off?
- ◇ Have you read and understood the risk assessment for the building you're in and has that been signed off?
- ◇ Has your manager answered any questions you have about the risk assessment?
- ◇ Are you familiar with the expectations of you when at work? (toilets, lifts, corridors, kitchens, need for distancing etc.)
- ◇ Are you aware of which parts of the University are open or closed and the need to remain in your own agreed workplace?
- ◇ Are you able to travel to and from work in a way you're comfortable with?
- ◇ Are you dealing with issues at home? (caring responsibilities, childcare etc.)



- ◇ Do you have relevant health issues which may impact on your return to work?
- ◇ Are you comfortable with others in your team and aware of any shift working arrangements?
- ◇ Is your line manager due to be on-site and if not, who is responsible for your work and your safety?
- ◇ Are you aware of the procedure for emergency building evacuations in the event of the alarm going off or who to contact if you require first aid?
- ◇ Are you going to be working alone and is this something that you're comfortable with?
- ◇ Is it necessary to ask your manager for flexibility over the days and hours you're required to work on-site for whatever reason?

There's more guidance for University workers on UNISON's national website:

<https://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/education-services/key-issues/covid-19-advice-staff/>

Some thoughts on the future of the University

The situation changes all the time, and it now seems that some of the earlier worries about student recruitment for 2020-21 may be unfounded. Applications on a national basis are not catastrophically down, at least in terms of actual, current applications.

This could all change of course with fluctuations of the national situation. We'll probably, as will potential students, have a better idea of what a second wave looks like, but we'll need to wait until after the start of term to know if the colder weather makes a difference. We'll also need to wait until October to see how many students have actually turned up and how many want to stay.

Maybe the lack of other viable options has led to student applications appearing to be unaffected by the crisis, or maybe many are hedging their bets. International students are probably looking at a range of options across the planet and the current geopolitical situation with respect to China could have profound and lasting effects on the population of Chinese students in the UK for years to come.

At Brighton, it's necessary to overlay the situation as it would have been anyway with the complications of this crisis. Student recruitment for 2020 may be ok as far as the sector is concerned, but fluctuations in student populations, as secure universities like Bristol deliberately expand, has been happening and will continue to happen since many students are looking to "trade up" where they can.

Foreseeing problems, the government introduced a 5% limit on student number increases, but from projected numbers, so this is a case of new rules to the game played by many Vice-Chancellors as they look to increase the prospects of their own institution, perhaps to the detriment of others.

A shortfall in student recruitment will have profound implications for three years when the financial system depends on a steady flow of £9,250 units. How this plays out is complicated, since universities have different degrees of exposure to debt and the details of what happens if the longer term financial prospects of repaying that debt shifts. Banks treat universities as companies with sales and costs and want to make sure that the institution they've lent millions to can still pay back the cash, with interest and on time. If there's doubt about this, they may have the power to demand instant repayment, increase the interest rates and/or insist on remedial action to regain "profitability" (closures of expensive courses, outsourcing services, reductions to the overall payroll etc.)

It's entirely possible that the crisis facing universities is localised to those with large international student populations which cannot make up for it by home student recruitment and those which maybe would have struggled to recruit in an era of university marketisation and league table obsession anyway.

Brighton has yet to face a major crisis. There have been restructures, closures and rounds of voluntary severance, but a large scale programme of change as a result of a profound financial crisis would be new.

If this happens, and it might, then we would seek to campaign alongside the University's management for significant funding from OfS and the government to preserve everything we value about the University. This could well be alongside other institutions which have suffered under such a reckless series of policies designed to turn universities into factories.