

Members vote on strike action over pay

UNISON members in nine of the region's universities are set to begin voting on 28 June over whether or not to take strike action to improve last year's 0% pay award.

Members in Brighton, Chichester, Open University, Oxford Brookes, Portsmouth, Solent, Southampton, Surrey and Winchester will all be taking part.

Under the approach that UNISON has adopted this time, each ballot will be separate, so that a vote for action in one university can go ahead even if a vote in another is lost.

Under the anti-trade union laws, turnout will still need to be 50% for a ballot to succeed.

This vote comes shortly after all branches have been consulting members on this year's pay offer of 3.65% for those on spine point 3 reducing to 1.54% for those on spine point 21, with 1.5% for everyone above that level.

The union's HE committee has rejected both offers and is recommending a YES vote for strike action on the 2020 pay freeze and a rejection of the 2021 offer.

Tactically there is a hope that action on the 0% can force the employer to improve this year's offer.

In real terms, many of UNISON's members are effectively being offered 1.5% over two years – less than the current rate of inflation (using the Consumer Price Index), which in April stood at 1.5%.

Many members have also seen the 0% offer in 2020 as little reward for the huge efforts that were made during the start of the Covid pandemic and the way in which the workforce has faced redundancies, increasing workloads and additional pressure to support students.



The industrial action pay ballot will run from 28 June to 10 August © UNISON

Understandably, some members might get confused about the two pay issues taking place at the same time, and the fact that not all universities are involved in the vote on strike action.

This is because branches were able to decide whether or not their members should be included.

For those that are, the pay ballot on last year's 0% offer will take place by post, whereas the consultation on this year's offer for all members is taking place online.

The 2021 offer would mean that the lowest pay point would be equivalent to the current foundation living wage rate of £9.50, but only for those working a 35-hour week.

In truth, it falls far short of UNISON's claim for a £2,500 increase and a move towards introducing a 35-hour working week for all HE staff.

UNISON national officer Ruth Levin said: "Whilst this pay offer finally brings the pay freeze to an end, it simply doesn't go far enough to address the loss in value of the wages of higher education staff working so hard to keep their universities going over the last 18 months."

Keeping in touch - Moved house? Changed job?

If your details have changed, please amend your membership record at unison.org.uk/my-unison or contact your branch. If you would like to find out what is going on in HE across the region you can join our online, informal HE meetings which are held every few weeks. Please send your email address to n.duncan-jordan@unison.co.uk if you'd like an invitation.

Covid prompts Universities to talk about 'hybrid' working arrangements

Whether it's labelled as agile working, smart working or hybrid working, most HE employers are now beginning to look at the arrangements for staff working either wholly or partly from home.

Some have realised that despite years of resistance to enabling their employees the flexibility of homeworking, many now run to embrace it with a speed that has to be cautioned.

Whilst some staff will welcome the chance to work more flexibly, the move to hybrid working raises some serious issues that local branches will need to consider.

There will understandably be concerns around paying for broadband services, equipment and stationery that will need to be resolved, as well as issues around insurance and liability for health and safety, including accidents at home.

In addition, there are concerns around the impact that isolated home working has on the mental well-being of staff.



Balancing work and home remains a challenge © UCL

Some universities are reintroducing the old concept of 'hot desking', on the understanding that fewer staff will be needed on campus, but this breeds a sense of insecurity in the workplace and a loss of place at the very time when staff need to feel more secure, not less.

The next few months will begin to see employers propose changes, including some to contracts, so members should contact their branch to get advice.

Government attacks funding to HE arts courses

Ministers want to impose a savage 50% funding cut to arts subjects at HE level in England.

The Office for Students (OfS), which distributes government funding to support HE providers, said: "The government proposes that the courses that are not among its strategic priorities – covering subjects in music, dance, drama and performing arts; art and design; media studies; and archaeology – are to be subject to a reduction of 50%."

In his guidance letter to the OfS, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said: "The OfS should reprioritise funding towards the provision of high-cost, high-value subjects ... We would then potentially seek further reductions in future years."

There is little doubt that this is an attack on the future of UK arts, the creative potential of the next generation, and the people who deliver our world-leading arts courses.

It also forms part of the government's cultural offensive against courses that they deem to be 'progressive'.

Rather than devaluing the arts in this way, the government should maintain its important investment in creative skills, ensuring that arts courses are widely accessible and properly supported.

Many UNISON members will be rightly concerned about the impact that such cuts could have on their jobs, especially as universities are already looking to make savings as a result of Covid.

TAKE ACTION: Support the arts by signing this online petition: <https://www.campaignforthearts.org/petitions/stop-the-50-percent-funding-cut-to-arts-subjects-in-higher-education/>