

Joint University/UCU Committee

24/01 A meeting of the Joint University/UCU Committee was held on Thursday 7 March 2024 at 14.00 in Committee Room 1, Whiteknights House/remotely via Microsoft Teams.

Present:

Dr Deepa Driver, President of Reading UCU [*Chair*]
Rita Balestrini, Reading UCU Anti-Casualisation Officer
Dr Simon Clarke, Senate Representative
Moray McAulay, UCU Regional Official – *via Teams*
Dr Richard Messer, Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary
Ellen Owens, Reading UCU Treasurer
Colette Maxfield, UCU Branch Administrator – *via Teams*
Claire Rolstone, Director of HR
Professor Robert Van de Noort, Vice Chancellor
Katie Smith, Senior Governance Officer [*Secretary*]

Apologies were received from:

Hattie Robinson, Reading UCU Membership Secretary
Professor Parveen Yaqoob, Deputy Vice Chancellor

24/02 Minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2023

The President of Reading UCU requested that the Chairing of these meetings alternate between themselves and the Vice Chancellor each meeting rather than each year (as was currently the case); it was agreed to do so.

The President of Reading UCU expressed gratitude for the University having agreed to accommodate the Reading UCU Branch Administrator attending these meetings in order to take notes; this would help to assist with the progression of actions allocated to UCU.

The minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2023 were agreed as a correct record, subject to the President of Reading UCU requesting amendments to two sections for the purpose of clarification; these changes were agreed.

Action: Secretary

The President of Reading UCU noted that the Vice Chancellor's report to Senate was typically included in the papers for JUUC and requested that any decisions made at Senate also be included. The Vice Chancellor confirmed their willingness to include the draft minutes of Senate in the JUUC papers where possible.

Action: Secretary

24/03 Matters Arising

a) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

In response to the action for the President of Reading UCU to be able meet with relevant colleagues from Finance, the Vice Chancellor confirmed that they had raised this with the Director of Finance and the Director of HR agreed to follow this up.

Action: Director of HR

b) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

Further to UCU's request for the Vice Chancellor to review the finances and consider whether a one-off non-consolidated payment to all staff might be made possible, the Vice Chancellor confirmed there was no space in the budget for such a payment.

c) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

It was confirmed that the President of Reading UCU had provided their specific concerns regarding the Lecture Capture policy in writing to the Director of HR. These were currently being reviewed by the Director of HR and Legal Services and a written response would be provided to the President of Reading UCU in due course.

Action: Director of HR

d) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

The University Secretary confirmed that the President of Reading UCU's request for observer status on Council had been shared with the President of Council, who was currently considering this.

Action: University Secretary
to follow up with President of Council

e) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

Further to the President of Reading UCU's previous request that the University reconsider disclosing their responses to consultations, the Vice Chancellor reaffirmed their decision not to do so in order to reserve the confidence that existed at consultation processes, noting the importance of being able to defend a single

position in national negotiations. The President of Reading UCU highlighted that other universities published their consultation responses and advised that UCEA and UUK had explicitly stated that they encouraged universities to share these; the Vice Chancellor suggested that the President of Reading UCU share with them any written statements demonstrating this. The Vice Chancellor reiterated that it was an essential part of national negotiations that universities could act as a single voice; if every university published their response, it would result in the end of national pay bargaining. The President of Reading UCU requested more transparency for staff in terms of how the University arrived at a position, even if certain parts were redacted. The Vice Chancellor noted that their position on pensions had been transparent throughout, including their support for a return of benefits over a reduction in contributions; they reiterated that they would not be willing to share consultation documents as this would undermine their internal space for discussion. However, following a consultation response, the Vice Chancellor would be happy to respond to any specific questions raised by the President of Reading UCU.

f) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

It was confirmed that the President of Reading UCU had sent their specific concerns relating to Prevent to the University Secretary. The University Secretary clarified that the OFS required the University to sign up to, and implement, Prevent Duty. The University simply complied with Prevent Duty; it did not promote it.

g) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

The Director of HR confirmed that, following the previous JUUC, a series of consultation meetings had been held with UCU regarding the closure of the previous School of Humanities and the opening of the new School of Humanities. It was noted that the President of Reading UCU had requested that UCU be included in the current work taking place within Humanities in relation to workload. The Director of HR confirmed that the current work comprised of groups of colleagues from the two Schools coming together informally to share ways of working etc. The Director of HR highlighted that UCU had previously been offered the opportunity to request further meetings of the formal consultation group and that they would be happy to arrange such a meeting at UCU's request. Following a discussion, it was clarified that the work described within Humanities was entirely separate to work taking place regarding individual expectations or the academic career framework; the Director of HR confirmed that consultation would be taking place with UCU on this in due course. It was agreed that the Director of HR would arrange a further meeting of the formal consultation group.

Action: Director of HR

h) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

The Vice Chancellor confirmed that they had raised the matter of understanding how Artificial Intelligence worked with Turnitin with the Chief Digital and Information Officer; the work of the Artificial Intelligence Working Group remained ongoing.

i) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

The Vice Chancellor confirmed that they had spoken with relevant colleagues regarding UCU's previous feedback on the impact that Blackboard Ultra was having on workloads. They highlighted that the University had no choice but to move to new systems when those previously used were no longer supported; colleagues were receiving support through regular communications and training. The President of Reading UCU highlighted that it was difficult for colleagues to fit in the additional workload caused by the move to Blackboard Ultra when there was no slack in existing workloads. They requested that, given this transition, other deliverables/ aspects of workloads be treated with more flexibility; the Vice Chancellor confirmed that they would look into this.

Action: Vice Chancellor

j) *Minute 23/24 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

In relation to the review of the Reward Committee process, the Director of HR confirmed that it was hoped to have the proposals finalised by the end of March and they will then bring it to Reading UCU. It was clarified that there were no significant changes to the current process; the intention had been to reduce workload through a move to appropriate management decisions rather than large committee-based decisions.

Action: Director of HR

k) *Minute 23/27 Update on the current phase of reorganisation*

It was noted that there were now regular meetings between the Director of HR and the President of Reading UCU.

24/04 Report of the Vice Chancellor

The Committee received and noted the Vice Chancellor's February report to Senate. The Vice Chancellor invited questions from UCU Representatives and the following was noted in particular:

- The President of Reading UCU requested further information in relation to Lifelong Learning Entitlement. The Vice Chancellor clarified that the government intended for everyone to receive four years' post-18 entitlement for education; this would come in 30-credit blocks, with credits obtained at one institution transferable to any other institution. They noted that progress still needed to be made in terms of how credits would be transferred, as well

as demonstrating a demand for this approach.

- The President of Reading UCU noted discussions at Senate regarding Lecture Capture helping students in relation to both the Cost of Living and accessibility; they noted that Lecture Capture was still opt-out at UoR and should therefore not be used as a solution to either disability or inclusion. Furthermore, the President of UCU requested that colleagues be reminded that Lecture Capture was opt-out, as this was not considered to be widely understood, and that this also be made clear to students so as to not affect the feedback for any staff members who did choose to opt out.
- The UCU Regional Official noted the update provided regarding academic freedom and external speaker guidance. They highlighted recent examples of media and other pressure curtailing academic freedom within the sector, in particular, online commentary on subjects of importance which may be controversial (e.g. comments on social media). The President of Reading UCU provided further commentary in relation to self-censorship and other impact on staff and academic integrity. This appeared to be a trend within the sector that was a particular threat to academic freedom. The Vice Chancellor was asked to provide assurance that, should such issues affect UoR staff, they would be willing to continue to stand with staff and defend the principle of academic freedom. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that they would and highlighted a recent article in the Guardian, in which they spoke to concerns relating to academic freedom and self-censorship.
- Noting the update on the Access and Participation Plan, the President of Reading UCU expressed their desire to speak with relevant colleagues at the University regarding other disability-related matters, such as the use of the disability passport. The Director of HR confirmed that a disability passport and tailored adjustment plan had already been put in place following consultation with UCU and the Disability Network; they would be happy to work with UCU to increase awareness of this.
- The President of Reading UCU indicated their intention to liaise with the University outside of the meeting regarding nuances relating to the external speaker policy and encouraging colleagues to not see this as a barrier.
- Noting that the Cost of Living discussion at Senate had related to students only, the President of Reading UCU asked how the University was helping colleagues with the Cost of Living crisis. The Director of HR confirmed that a number of initiatives had been introduced on campus when the Cost of Living pressure was at its highest - this had included information on financial

wellbeing and discounted staff meal deals (the latter of which had recently been extended). The President of Reading UCU noted recent increases in train fares and highlighted that colleagues often opted to use public transport for reasons of sustainability. The Director of HR advised that the University offered loans for train tickets as well as a scheme for bus travel. The President of Reading UCU requested details of these, so that this information could be shared with branch members.

Action: Director of HR

- With regards to the various elements of capital investment discussed at Senate, the President of Reading UCU hoped to discuss outside of the meeting a sustainable way of matching these with investments in staff.
- With regards to Lecture Capture, and more generally, the President of Reading UCU highlighted the need to clarify the practical and pedagogical differences of teaching in person versus teaching online.
- The President of Reading UCU noted recent issues regarding access to the Miller building; while these had now been resolved, they highlighted the need to consider whether the upcoming building works relating to ECMWF would cause any pressures in terms of access to campus, public transport etc.
- The President of Reading UCU noted the recent report on perceptions of research culture at UoR and suggested that there was a specific element of scholarship that needed to be included within workloads and separated from research time. It was suggested that the University should refer to 'research and scholarship culture' to recognise the need for colleagues to have time to devote to scholarship in its own right. There was a brief discussion regarding the TI role profile and the Director of HR confirmed that this had captured time within the workload to ensure pedagogical research. Reading UCU suggested that a distinction be made apparent between pedagogical research and scholarship.
- The President of Reading UCU noted the sustainability element of the Senate report and noted the balance between environmental sustainability and the benefits colleagues gained from being present in person at certain conferences etc. They requested that the University take this seriously in terms of both the physical and mental health implications of online engagement, in addition to the impact on the recruitment of new students and the development of new relationships.
- In relation to the discussion regarding KTP contracts at the previous meeting, it had been found that the practice followed at UoR did not appear to be

consistent with that of other universities. The Director of HR confirmed that they had discussed this with the UCU Regional Official and would be providing a response in due course.

Action: Director of HR

- With regards to the plan to increase student numbers, the President of Reading UCU raised student/staff ratios as an area of concern in relation to aspects such as contact time, workload, the burden on facilities/estates and the overload on colleagues in areas such as Disability, Wellbeing and Counselling. The President of Reading UCU requested that research time be ringfenced and that further information be provided in terms of the use of on-campus and off-campus spaces, as well as the balance between UG and PG teaching and how areas of significant growth were going to be resourced. The UCU Regional Official noted that the student/staff ratio was a key measure of student experience, with implications for the NSS; they also highlighted the need for careful calibration of targets so that these did not become assumptions. The Vice Chancellor responded that, given the deficit budget, if the University did not grow student numbers it would have to reduce costs, which would have direct consequences for staff and other activities. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that the University was investing quite significantly in Schools which had growth potential. UCU questioned the approach of investing in areas with growth potential and queried how decisions were being made in terms of which areas to invest in. The Vice Chancellor noted that there were areas where there was a high demand for university places and others where there was a low demand; the University was responding to what students wanted to study, as it would be expected to. The Vice Chancellor further clarified that the University was not restricting growth in any area. Reading UCU emphasised that these decisions could lead to staff undertaking work on a voluntary basis, that should actually be supported by UoR resource, resulting in H&S/workload issues. The Vice Chancellor highlighted that the University currently had no more students and no less staff than in 2014. The President of Reading UCU requested that this data be shared with them.

Action: Vice Chancellor

The President of Reading UCU also requested information in terms of UPP capital contribution and any implications for timetabling policy changes (including longer days). The Vice Chancellor confirmed that no decisions had yet been made regarding either of these matters. Work was currently underway to review the impact of inflation on building halls of accommodation and the prices for students. In terms of the teaching schedule, the University Secretary advised that colleagues were engaging

with Schools and Departments who had a particular impact on the timetable to help understand what options were available; the President of Reading UCU requested a brief written update on this work.

Action: University Secretary

- The President of Reading UCU requested standing updates regarding the University of Reading Malaysia and off-campus developments. The Vice Chancellor clarified that the University had not invested in buildings such as Shinfield Studios and the British Museum site - these had been built by the companies using those facilities and UoR only provides the infrastructure.

Action: Vice Chancellor

24/05 Report of the President of Reading UCU

The President of Reading UCU provided an update and the following was noted in particular:

- UCU had abstained to vote at the recent UCEA/UCU transfer meeting, meaning that UCEA had been able to meet various requirements. Negotiations regarding the USS continued nationally; work had begun on governance and UCU were happy to share further information as this work progressed. UCU welcomed the commitment to openness and transparency that had now been agreed with UCEA.
- The current General Secretary of UCU had recently been re-elected in addition to various other positive elections and re-elections on the NEC.
- The Director of HR was thanked for their assistance in rectifying a heating issue in SBS and sharing other communications which had now been passed to members. There was a brief discussion regarding an upcoming USS information session arranged by UCU; the Director of HR confirmed that, while they had committed to help publicise this event, changes to the USS had already been communicated and would not be shared again.

Items brought forward by the University

No further items were brought forward during the meeting.

Items brought forward by Reading UCU

24/06 Restructuring

The President of Reading UCU specifically asked for confirmation of any potential restructuring proposal and suggested that a separate meeting with the Pro-Vice

Chancellor (Academic Planning and Resource) on restructuring would be helpful, ideally before their next OGM. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that there were currently no restructuring proposals.

Routine items

24/07 Matters from Staffing Committee

The Committee received and noted a report from the most recent Staffing Committee held in February and the following was noted in particular:

- In relation to the HR system, the project was now on track and expected to be in place by the early Autumn.
- Work had been undertaken to embed Change Management Principles; this included supporting colleagues who led change as well as sharing toolkits and approaches across the University.
- As its previous supplier no longer offered this service, the University was considering new mechanisms by which to run more regular employee surveys in order to gain more information regarding staff experience/feedback etc.

The following comments were noted:

- The President of Reading UCU advised that they had been working closely with colleagues in HR in relation to a review of the Performance Management procedure. The Director of HR clarified that this was part of a suite of procedures that were reviewed and updated on a regular basis; once UCU had agreed its position on the final version, this would be submitted to UEB.
- In relation to the USS, the President of Reading UCU highlighted proposals to changes to scheme factors which would affect colleagues with certain or imminent plans for retirement in terms of differences to their quotes.
- A concern was raised in relation to the provision of reasonable adjustments for students – in particular, what would happen if a member of staff, acting in good faith, got this wrong. The President of Reading UCU also highlighted the need to recognise that there might be reasonable adjustments on both sides. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that, if a member of staff got this wrong, as long as there was no intent to do so, the University would support them. The University was responsible unless a member of staff had decided to completely overrule it.

24/08 Any other business

The following was raised:

- The Director of HR noted the National Living Wage changes coming in from April and advised that they were looking at some possible changes to accommodate these – they would send information to UCU regarding this.

Action: Director of HR

24/09 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Wednesday 22 May 2024.