

Joint University/UCU Committee

23/10 A meeting of the Joint University/UCU Committee was held on Wednesday 17 May 2023 at 10.30 in Committee Room 2, Whiteknights House/remotely via Microsoft Teams.

Present:

Professor Robert Van de Noort, Vice Chancellor [*Chair*]

Dr Simon Clarke, Senate Representative

Dr David Field, UCU Representative

Dr Richard Messer, Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary – *via Teams*

Sally Pellow, President of Reading UCU

Claire Rolstone, Interim Director of HR

Nat Willmott, UCU Representative – *via Teams*

Professor Parveen Yaqoob, Deputy Vice Chancellor

Katie Smith, Senior Governance Officer [*Secretary*]

Apologies:

Moray McAulay, UCU Regional Official

23/11 Minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 31 January 2023 were agreed as a correct record, subject to a minor clarification that discussions between UCU Representatives and Health & Safety Services regarding Smart working had not taken place at standalone meetings but rather as part of other regular catch ups and at the University Health, Safety and Wellbeing Committee.

Action: Secretary

23/12 Matters Arising not covered elsewhere on the agenda

a) Minute 23/03 e) (22/27) *Matters from the Staffing Committee*

Further to the action regarding UCU involvement in the next stage of the Smart working review, the Interim Director of HR confirmed that Nat Willmott (UCU Representative) had now been contacted in relation to this. The Committee was advised of the intention to submit a paper regarding Smart working to the next Staffing

Committee in June; the outcome would then be reported back to the Joint University/UCU Committee through the regular Staffing Committee report.

b) *Minute 23/05 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

Further to their action to ask Legal Services for the process for establishing a partnership, the Vice Chancellor advised that they had learnt that there was not in fact currently a formal policy in place and that determining whether or not a partnership was established was instead done on a case-by-case basis. However, work was underway by Legal Services in relation to this, including the development of a checklist for establishing future partnerships.

Dr Field joined the meeting

c) *Minute 23/05 Report of the President of Reading UCU*

With regards to their action to look into KTP contracts, the Interim Director of HR confirmed that matters such as sick leave, annual leave etc. aligned with the policies of the company that the University was working with. If this practice was not in line with what was taking place at other universities, the Interim Director of HR confirmed their willingness to liaise with the UCU Regional Official regarding this.

23/13 Report of the Vice-Chancellor

The Committee received and noted the Vice Chancellor's February report to Senate. In addition to this, the Vice Chancellor provided the following update ahead of the All-Staff Briefing the following day:

- The University had submitted a budget to Council for the next year which was £30m in deficit. This was overwhelmingly as a result of the increased costs encountered due to inflationary pressures. The deficit was previously £50m but the planning process had already reduced this by £20m. A plan would be presented to the July meeting of Council to show how the £30m deficit would be resolved within four years, as follows:
 - Vacancy controls (already in place) – it was hoped to save £5m per year.
 - Changes to Professional Services – the intention was to consolidate functions into larger groupings and to ensure that processes were as efficient as possible.
 - Student recruitment growth – the University was considered to be in a strong position to continue to increase student numbers (including undergraduate and postgraduate, home and international).

- Other scoping studies, based on what was taking place within the sector and elsewhere, (hoped to save an additional £8m) included:
 - January starts
 - Opportunities for savings in relation to research
 - Academic structures (including Henley Business School)
 - Shared services
 - Artificial intelligence

The Vice Chancellor intended to meet with UCU and the Staff Forum in advance of the July meeting of Council.

A wide-ranging discussion followed and the points below were noted in particular:

- The President of Reading UCU queried what was meant by the reorganisation of functions. It was clarified that more detailed discussions regarding this would shortly be taking place; however, work relating to Professional Services had already been ongoing as part of the Strategic Foundations Programme. This included improving the efficiency of processes and continuing to improve decision-making (such as prioritisation and phasing) around major projects, following on from the work already undertaken as part of the new Change Governance process. The intention was to make the structure as clear and efficient as possible, with fewer directorates meaning that resource could be considered across functions. It was highlighted that UoR was the only university in its peer group to have 18 functions and that the University would be standing apart from other institutions if it did not move towards a smaller number of units.
- UCU Representatives suggested that embedding functions within schools could help to improve the efficiency of processes, commenting that certain areas had worked better when this had been the case. They suggested that there was much to be learnt from PAS, for example in relation to issues arising from not sufficiently consulting with colleagues on the ground, and queried how local understanding would be better harnessed on this occasion. Whilst the value of local understanding was certainly recognised, it was highlighted that the University would also need to balance this with both consistency and cost of service. It was acknowledged that it would be important to work with colleagues who understood the relevant processes, to not review all processes at the same time and to ensure that work was not simply being transferred elsewhere.

- UCU queried whether online courses formed part of the projected student growth and it was confirmed that they did not. The Vice Chancellor noted that there was a global market for online learning which the University did not have the expertise to manage itself, for example the need to have systems in place to support students 24/7. Work had been underway for some time to identify an appropriate partner and there would shortly be a formal announcement regarding the University's partnership with Cambridge Education Group Digital. CEG would be working with the University to put a number of programmes online and would provide the majority of support for these online students. If successful, this would of course help the financial situation, but it was acknowledged that many other universities were also moving into this space. The President of Reading UCU raised a concern regarding the use of external groups and highlighted the importance of ensuring that staff who were employed by such groups were done so on a reasonable and favourable basis.
- UCU Representatives noted an earlier comment from the Vice Chancellor that areas of opportunity for student growth were not evenly distributed across the University and asserted that UCU would not want to see any detriment to schools which were currently less popular in terms of the fashions of incoming students or the closing of any departments. The Vice Chancellor advised that, whilst there were no current plans for closures, any schools with growth potential would be keen to see a corresponding increase in staff numbers in order to support this; it would be necessary to balance this against the subsidising of other areas in order for the University to be able to recover financially. Data would be used in due course to assess the scale of the situation fully. The President of Reading UCU emphasised that the variety of courses offered was part of the University's appeal.
- There was a discussion regarding January starts and it was clarified that there were approximately eight subjects where there appeared to be a specific market for this. Whilst UCU Representatives acknowledged that January starts were already taking place in some areas of the University, it was suggested that some colleagues could resist the introduction of these, given the perceived workload implications. The Vice Chancellor advised of another university which had achieved such a significant intake for January PGT programmes that they had closed some of their September starts. Data showed that there had been 80,000 January starters last year and recruitment was considered to be particularly strong from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Based on market analysis, the introduction of January starts was considered to be a way to generate significant extra income from select programmes. It was also highlighted that the move to semesters would help if it was decided to proceed with this option.

- In relation to a query regarding shared services, the Vice Chancellor advised that it was a growing trend within the sector to share certain services with other public sector institutions, such as Health & Safety, Legal and Internal Audit – for example. The benefits of this were highlighted, including increased capacity and the ability to accommodate specialisms. UCU queried how this model was different from outsourcing and it was clarified that it was necessary for the company which was set up to be owned as a joint venture, which also avoided the need to charge VAT for services provided. Whilst UCU Representatives acknowledged that shared services were very common in local government, an example relating to outsourcing at another university was referenced and it was highlighted that there were various risks/implications to this and many additional factors to be considered beyond savings. Any potential changes to the terms and conditions of staff were of particular concern from UCU's perspective. The Vice Chancellor reiterated that shared services were only being considered at this stage.
- There was a brief discussion regarding the University of Reading Malaysia, including the significant impact of the Covid pandemic, the business plan which was in place for the campus [redacted Sec 43].
- There was a brief conversation regarding the costs associated with the apprenticeship levy – it was confirmed that, whilst the University did make deficit on apprenticeships, it did not make a full contribution to direct costs.
- In response to a query regarding academic restructuring, with particular reference to Henley Business School, it was clarified that HBS had merged with UoR 15 years ago and had many bespoke programmes and activities which had resulted in the use of different systems and processes to the rest of the University. Work had already begun to consider the HBS structure, both in terms of what the wider University could learn from HBS and vice versa, and how best to organise everything for the benefit of both.
- UCU Representatives raised issues of both workload and the amount of change planned in relation to the health, safety and wellbeing of staff. It was queried what mechanisms would be in place to monitor workloads and to ensure that any decisions made were clear and realistic in terms of identifying priorities and whether other activities/processes would need to be stopped in order to accommodate these. It was highlighted that the communication the following day would create anxiety and consideration would be needed as to how staff would be supported. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that thought was always given as to how best to share such information with colleagues. The Interim Director of HR

advised that there were active discussions taking place, including with regards to communications and engagement, and the intention was that this work would lead to improved workloads in the future - they would be happy to speak with UCU regarding this. In response to a comment from UCU that there had not been any staff surveys undertaken recently, it was also confirmed that work was underway on a new programme of delivery for engagement surveys. UCU Representatives were pleased to hear that consideration was being given to improving workloads in the longer term but highlighted the need to also monitor the process of going through these changes, which could itself increase the risk of staff burnout. It was noted that the scale of the reports received by UCU from members over the last 18 months in relation to workload, stress and burnout had been concerning. It was agreed that wider societal matters, including the Covid pandemic, were also contributing to such issues. UCU Representatives highlighted the need for awareness of all the additional factors impacting colleagues outside of work during this period of change within the University.

23/14 Report of the President of Reading UCU

The President of Reading UCU provided a verbal report, raising the following matters:

- Action had been stood down in relation to the USS (Universities Superannuation Scheme) for the moment and UCU hoped for a positive outcome to the dispute.
- UCU urged the University to be as engaged as possible with regards to the new JNCHES (Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff) and appreciated the positive contributions that had already been made. It was noted that UoR could demonstrate best practice in a number of areas that had previously been addressed, such as casualisation, fixed-term contracts and grading. The Interim Director of HR advised that they had volunteered to be part of any workshops etc. that arose from the terms of reference and had already liaised with UCEA (Universities and Colleges Employers Association) regarding how else they could get involved.
- An increase in parking charges had been referenced in the Council minutes. The University Secretary agreed to provide further details regarding the decision recently taken by the Estates Committee.

Action: University Secretary

- The departure of the Dean of Henley Business School had recently been announced and UCU queried how this role would fit with the University's management structure going forward. The Vice Chancellor confirmed that an internal recruitment process would be undertaken for a new Dean for a six-year

term. It was noted that, in contrast to other Heads of School, the Dean of HBS had a place on Council. Additionally, they were managed by the Vice Chancellor rather than the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic Planning & Resource) due to requirements arising from accreditation processes.

Items brought forward by the University

No further items were brought forward during the meeting.

Items brought forward by Reading UCU

No further items were brought forward during the meeting.

Routine items

23/15 Matters from the Staffing Committee

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

- The project to replace Trent was currently on time and on budget. The communication and change programme would shortly begin and would include opportunities for colleagues to get involved, such as a 'Champions' programme and user acceptance testing. In response to a query, the Interim Director of HR confirmed that the 'go live' dates would be staggered, with payroll and the core system in November and recruitment and the Learning Management System at the start of 2024, and were all still on track. UCU Representatives noted that other universities had publicly had issues regarding projects of this nature and the Interim Director of HR confirmed that there were a number of contingency plans in place, including the use of parallel pay runs. UCU suggested that communications detailing who to contact regarding any issues could be helpful.

23/16 Any Other Business

The following was raised:

- The Interim Director of HR offered to share details regarding the University's forthcoming implementation of the 'Report + Support' tool with Committee Members when the minutes of this meeting were circulated. It was clarified that this would allow anonymous reporting from both students and staff, was already in place at many universities and was part of the recommendations arising from the Race Equality Review.

- The Vice Chancellor thanked Sally Pellow, noting that this would be her last meeting as President of Reading UCU.

23/17 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was to be confirmed. *[Post-meeting note: the next meeting will be taking place on Thursday 2 November 2023].*