

## Governance Restricted Minutes

### Joint University/UCU Committee

22/10 A meeting of the Joint University/UCU Committee was held on Wednesday 18 May 2022 at 10.30 remotely, via Microsoft Teams.

Present:

Sally Pellow, President of Reading UCU [*Chair*]  
Dr Ian Bland, UCU Representative  
Dr David Field, UCU Representative  
Moray McAulay, UCU Regional Official  
Claire Rolstone, Interim Director of HR  
Professor Robert Van de Noort, Vice Chancellor  
Nat Willmott, UCU Representative  
Professor Parveen Yaqoob, Deputy Vice Chancellor  
Katie Smith, Senior Governance Officer [*Secretary*]

Apologies:

Dr Richard Messer, Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary

22/11 Minutes of the meeting held on 1 February 2022

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 February 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

22/12 Matters Arising not covered elsewhere on the agenda

Minute 22/05 Report of the President of Reading UCU

It was confirmed that the Vice Chancellor had responded by the deadline to the proposals submitted by UCU in relation to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) dispute.

22/13 Report of the Vice Chancellor

The Committee received the Vice Chancellor's February report to Senate. In addition, the following was noted:

- The recent appointment of Paul Lindley OBE as the new Chancellor for the University.
- Developments in relation to Thames Valley Science Park were proceeding well, with interest from a significant number of organisations. The National History Museum would shortly be announcing its intention to open a new facility at TVSP, which it was hoped would provide opportunities for collaboration, potentially in areas such as climate change, for example.

The following comments in response to the Vice Chancellor's report were noted in particular:

- The President of Reading UCU noted the recent government response to the Augar report, including:
  - Changes to student loans (including extending the length of years for repayment). The President of Reading UCU highlighted that it would be important to recognise what this meant for students (noting greater implications for students who would be on the lower end of the pay scale) and to consider how best to support them, both during their time at University and also in terms of obtaining the best possible job afterwards. It was commented that it was also disappointing that maintenance grants had

- not been reinstated, despite the recommendation to do so. UCU recognised how beneficial the Campus Jobs scheme was for students.
- A freezing of tuition fees for the next three years. The Vice Chancellor advised that this was effectively a five-year freeze given the timescale required for any decisions to be made prior to commencing recruitment for a given year. The UCU Regional Official noted that, while UCU policy would prefer the education system to be free at the point of delivery, it was recognised that this represented a significant cut to university incomes, particularly in the context of such high inflation.
  - Lifelong Learning entitlement for four years of post-18 education. The President of Reading UCU highlighted that this could make it more difficult to monitor and ensure that B3 conditions were met (the requirement for a minimum number of students to pass/progress etc.), particularly if such courses were taken at multiple institutions, for example.
  - It was noted that the University's REF 2021 results had recently been published. Recent headlines stating that the overall grade point had increased were referenced and it was suggested that this was largely due to an increase in flexibility resulting from the option to submit between one and five papers per person, rather than a requirement of four. The Deputy Vice Chancellor advised that particularly strong areas at the University had been highlighted on the Staff Portal, including Earth Systems, Archaeology and Typography, and that colleagues were still in the process of analysing the results. The UCU Regional Official reiterated that UCU had a longstanding policy that REF was not considered an appropriate way to allocate research or research funding. They noted that the modification of rules had impacted the breadth of submissions and highlighted that the implications for future research funding were not yet known. UCU would welcome hearing more regarding the analysis of the REF results at a future meeting. The Vice Chancellor advised that there would be a discussion regarding REF at a future meeting of Senate and confirmed that decisions were not just guided by metrics from REF but also through considering opportunities to differentiate from the rest of the sector, for example.

#### 22/14 Report of the President of Reading UCU

The President of Reading UCU provided a verbal report and the following was noted in particular:

- Strike action had taken place in relation to the USS pension scheme since the previous meeting, as well as a number of discussions. The Vice Chancellor was thanked for responding to members. The UCU Regional Official advised that there had since been a further re-ballot which was narrowly under the turnout threshold. Whilst there had not been enough votes to mandate further action, very high levels of support for this were demonstrated in the membership. UCU would be taking decisions about further actions in relation to the USS dispute at its national congress in June. UCU expressed concerns regarding the governance of the USS pension scheme and suggested that the changes to the scheme would continue to contribute to recruitment and retention challenges. The Vice Chancellor advised that there had been communications with staff regarding the USS pension scheme over three All-Staff Talks with the intention to discuss the situation as transparently as possible, including the fact that there was no easy resolution.
- Low morale was raised as an issue across the sector, as demonstrated in UCU's recent report 'UK higher education – A workforce in crisis' from March. The report described some employees potentially looking to leave the sector altogether,

which had also been reflected in conversations with members. UCU acknowledged that the University was already working on a number of associated areas (such as workloads etc.) but considered that there was more work still to be done. Another aspect also influencing this demoralisation was suggested to be the rise in inflation; it was confirmed that UCU had their own hardship fund as well as a fund to support those on strike action.

- UCU had been receiving queries in relation to returning to work and there appeared to be a lack of understanding regarding the difference between flexible and smart working, and the balance between home and office-based working. The Interim Director of HR advised that a review of smart working arrangements would be undertaken and they were keen to receive feedback from both staff and managers. It was clarified that the amount of time spent on campus was role-dependant and, while this was being addressed within teams, HR were willing to help with any individual queries. UCU representatives commented that one aspect of this was understanding what the smart working parameters were in terms of the responsibilities of managing colleagues' health and safety on and off campus, e.g. in terms of equipment and whether this was provided to staff. UCU also queried the variance between a formal request for flexible working and a tailored adjustment plan. The smart working 'frequently asked questions' were considered very helpful but UCU clarified their intention to ensure that there were no unintended consequences or gaps in relation to how different policies were operationalised. The Interim Director of HR confirmed their willingness to discuss this matter outside of the meeting. The Vice Chancellor advised that, following a meeting with the Staff Disability Network, a paper would be submitted to UEB regarding the fact that in-person meetings should be set up as hybrid and include the option to join online – if not, a clear explanation would need to be given as to why not. Work was also ongoing with the Staff Disability Network and DTS to ensure that the set up and equipment adopted for hybrid meetings was fit for purpose and it was hoped that this would further enhance the smart working policy. UCU representatives advised that they were aware of this work and also encouraged engagement with disabled staff members who were not part of that network.
- Concerns had been raised by some members in terms of the large-scale events taking place, such as the RUSU Summer Ball and Graduation, as well as the contrast between those who were and were not wearing face masks. The Deputy Vice Chancellor confirmed that the University was still monitoring Covid-19 cases, meaning it was possible to identify small outbreaks quickly. UCU representatives were advised regarding the actions taken in response to a recent outbreak, which were confirmed to have been successful in resulting in no further cases. The President of Reading UCU highlighted that UCU representatives still had no health and safety facilities time, which was required in addition to union facilities time.
- It was suggested that the University's narrative in relation to financial planning tended to focus on undergraduate level in terms of tuition fees and the President of Reading UCU noted that it was important to consider the impact of the postgraduate cycle in the longer term. The Vice Chancellor responded that the process for postgraduate recruitment was less predictable but acknowledged the feedback that a more holistic view could be provided as appropriate.
- 22/15 Update on the local UCU claim

The President of Reading UCU confirmed that they would provide the University with dates for the next joint panel in due course.

Items brought forward by the University

This item was covered elsewhere in the meeting.

Items brought forward by Reading UCU

This item was covered elsewhere in the meeting.

Routine items22/16 Matters from the Staffing Committee

The Committee received a report from the most recent Staffing Committee, held in February. The following comments were noted in relation to this:

- UCU commented that they would expect to be involved in a number of the discussions which had taken place at the last Staffing Committee and queried why UCU was not represented there. The Vice Chancellor clarified that Staffing Committee was a purely advisory committee; however, they agreed to discuss with the Chief Strategy Officer & University Secretary whether it would be beneficial for UCU representation to be included on the membership.

**Action: Vice Chancellor**

- UCU expressed their willingness to participate in further discussions regarding recruitment challenges, including the use of marketing supplements and other potential measures. The 2006 Framework Agreement was referenced by UCU representatives in relation to this, and it was highlighted that equal value and equal pay had been fundamental principles of that framework. It was queried what review of measures had taken place since then and it was suggested that this needed to be captured in discussions going forward, together with consideration of the wider national situation.
- It was confirmed that UCU had already been provided with the relationships policy for comment.
- In relation to the update received regarding academic staffing, UCU broadly welcomed what was reported, however wished for further discussions with the University in terms of recruitment issues, workforce planning and academic staffing – whether in this forum or elsewhere.

22/17 Any Other Business

It was noted that UCU representation on the Committee was yet to be confirmed for the next academic year. The UCU Regional Official advised that the AGM would be taking place in June and that the University would be advised following the outcome of the elections.

22/18 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting was to be confirmed. *[Post-meeting note: the next meeting will take place on Thursday 3 November 2022].*