

This letter has been sent to all colleagues at the College from Professor Paul Layzell, Principal

Colleagues,

Monday 24 February marks the start of 14 days of discontinuous strike action called for by the National Higher Education Committee of the University and College Union (UCU). This unprecedented level of action follows on from the eight days of action called for in November and December 2019 and is the third round of strike action in two years.

The industrial action results from pay and pension disputes between UCU and the national bodies that represent universities on pensions and pay, Universities UK (UUK) and Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), respectively. The disputes centres around total remuneration (pay and pension), which are negotiated nationally and areas which, although relevant to all universities, are managed locally; workload, casual contracts and the gender pay gap. [In my letter of 28 November](#) I walked through our position at that time in relation to these areas.

In this letter I am updating you on the progress made in relation to the important areas of workload, casualisation and gender pay, as well as on the national picture in relation to pensions and pay.

Progress on Pensions

The current pension dispute is part of a wider debate which sees universities and their staff share a common purpose in seeking to work with USS to deliver an affordable pension scheme with good benefits.

The current 2018 valuation resulted from the challenges made to the 2017 valuation and the positive work of the Joint Expert Panel (JEP) that reviewed the valuation. This work made the case for a further valuation (the 2018 valuation) which was accepted by USS but still required contribution increases. In line with previous agreements, these increases have been split 65:35 between employers and employees. The contribution increases are lower than the original 2017 valuation proposed and have been seen as a way to allow time to look at further ways of reducing the USS pension deficit as part of a 2020 valuation.

In preparation for the 2020 valuation, senior representatives from UUK, UCU and USS have met six times (one informal meeting, followed by five formal meetings) to discuss reform to the USS pension scheme. The talks are facilitated by the chair of the Joint Expert Panel (JEP), Joanne Segars.

The tripartite talks have been constructive and focussed on building a common understanding on the future of the scheme, the 2020 valuation and governance issues. Encouraging progress has been made and shared in jointly published statements, which are available here on the [USS News page](#) and also on the [JEP website](#). In particular, I understand that there has been a willingness from USS to be flexible in the range of options around the next valuation and its outcomes.

There has also been an agreement that the tripartite talks will continue through February and March 2020, with another four meetings scheduled.

My hope is that these talks will enable a jointly agreed and accepted 2020 valuation, upon which future employer and employee pension contributions can be based and which would avoid further industrial dispute in the future.

In the meantime, the current legal valuation and cost-sharing agreement applies, and I hope we can all find the goodwill and patience to allow the work of the JEP to reach an agreed conclusion and basis for future working.

Progress on Pay and Conditions

At a national level, on 27 January, UCEA passed to the trade unions (UCU, UNISON, Unite, GMB, EIS) a 'without prejudice' modified offer. The document contained a series of expectations regarding the focus and nature of individual HEI's engagement on the three employment topics in UCU's dispute; gender and ethnicity pay, workload and casual employment arrangements. The document also sets out amplified sector-level work that UCEA is offering to do with the national trade unions.

UCEA asked that all the trade unions consult with their members on the revised offer as a potential basis for conclusion of the 2019-20 Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES) round. UCEA awaits the trade unions' responses. Unfortunately, UCU did not present this offer to its members for consultation prior to its National Higher Education Committee initiating a further 14 days of strike action in February and March.

At Royal Holloway, we pride ourselves on our dual excellence, whereby we draw on our research expertise to deliver outstanding teaching. Many other universities make similar claims. What I believe makes us distinctive is the passion, care and commitment all colleagues demonstrate in the delivery and support of this dual excellence. I do not take this commitment for granted and this is reflected in our policy to promote academic staff based on their performance, without limit or quota, and in a range of supportive development policies from flexible working to sabbatical leave.

We are now entering the pay negotiations for 2020. While our staff costs have increased by almost 12% in 3 years (costing £10.9m), the UK undergraduate fee (our biggest source of income) has remained static at £9,250. However, I am conscious of the cost pressures facing all staff, not just those in the USS pension scheme, and therefore, as UCEA consults with the sector on the level of future pay awards, we will be supportive of a thorough examination of options. I believe that with limited resources, a focus on pay provides benefit to all staff.

Progress on Casualisation

Unnecessary casualisation of staff contracts is a concern for us all and therefore we have set up a group to systematically examine casual contracts and move them to different arrangements where appropriate.

A joint group comprising of Professor Katie Normington, Deputy Principal (Academic) and Peter Brook, Interim Director of Human Resources, is working with trade union colleagues to review the use of casual contractual arrangements in the delivery of teaching and related activity. This group is meeting fortnightly and has commenced work with the sharing and analysis of data to agree the numbers and types of arrangements in place.

HESA data shared with the trade unions shows that over the whole of the last academic year, 33% of academic and teaching related-contracts were casual or variable, but that these amount to just under 3% of our total academic and teaching full time equivalent staffing. These include hourly paid teaching staff with multiple contracts and cover 270 postgraduate students and 220 hourly paid teaching staff. Further work will be undertaken to review data relating to teaching and research staff on fixed-term contracts.

There will also be an in depth study of a school pilot, designed to identify options and opportunities to reduce the use of casual and fixed-term contracts; for example, by converting casual roles that are regularly used to fractional contracts. When the school pilot reaches its conclusion (in this academic year), the scheme will be rolled out to the other schools in 2020-2021.

The overall aim will be to create an effective framework for the continuous review of the use of casual, fixed term and hourly paid contracts for teaching delivery with a view, wherever possible, to move staff onto more secure contracts.

Progress on Workload

The creation of the new schools now provides the framework and resource to review workloads across school staff, ensuring greater consistency and transparency. This will lead to more equitable allocation of academic workloads across departments and provide the facility for individual staff members to raise concerns about their workload demands and to have these fairly examined. In the coming months, Heads of School will be working with colleagues on action plans to address some of the inconsistencies in workloads, providing a basis for further review and action.

Progress on Reducing the Gender Pay Gap

When I last wrote, I outlined how we had commissioned an acknowledged, external consultant to review our gender pay gap. A report has now been produced and considered by the Executive Board. The report will go shortly to a working group of Council, our governing body.

Good progress is being made in reducing our gender pay gap. Data for 2019 indicates an improvement of 2.7% in the mean (average) and an improvement of 9% in the median (mid-point) gender pay gap. These are pleasing results and, looking across sector results published thus far, are at the limit of what can reasonably be expected as a 'per annum reduction'.

However, the report goes on to suggest that there are other steps that can further reduce the gender pay gap. These suggestions are being compiled into a series of actions that we will implement to accelerate the reduction in our gender pay gap.

Regular progress reports will be shared with the trade unions through a Joint Negotiation and Consultation Committee (JNCC) sub-group that is being established in order to monitor and review progress, as well as the Council working group.

Industrial Action and the Impact on Students

Whilst there has been progress on many fronts, further industrial action has been called to take place in the term before most student assessments and examinations are due. This action is likely to cause students considerable stress and anxiety, particularly final year students, many of whom are experiencing industrial action for the third time in the course of their studies.

To seek to minimise the impact on our students, we expect that, on working days, activities will be delivered that will enable our students to meet the learning outcomes of their course and which will ensure they are prepared for assessments and examinations in the third term. We ask that colleagues give priority to these activities and create the best opportunities for our students to succeed.

During the strike action we will monitor closely which classes take place so that we can understand the impact of action on students.

In order to provide time for academic colleagues to offer additional support activities we have also taken the decision to move the start date of final year undergraduate examinations from Tuesday 28 April to Monday 04 May. Examinations for First and Second Year Undergraduates and Postgraduates will not change and will begin on Tuesday 28 April. The examination period will end by Friday 29 May as planned. A detailed 'Assessment Guidance for Industrial Action, 2019-20' will be issued shortly which will outline the policies and processes we will need to adopt around coursework and examinations.

Moving Forward

I hope from this letter colleagues can see the progress that has been made since December, when I last wrote.

The Joint Expert Panel and tripartite talks are developing recommendations with regard to the issue which was at the heart of this dispute in 2018, the USS valuation.

UCEA is entering the 2020 pay negotiations in the knowledge that higher education continues to be under pressure, but also that the climate of austerity in relation to public sector pay has changed.

Here at Royal Holloway we are making progress on gender pay, on casualisation and on workload.

These are all complex issues and will take time to resolve; but we have made progress and I am calling upon our national negotiation bodies, UCEA, UUK and UCU, and our local teams, to continue their work. In doing so, I hope that we can give them the time and space to act and we can avoid further industrial action that hurts our students and complicates the genuine attempts to resolve our challenges.

With best wishes

Professor Paul Layzell
Principal