

Report for the Annual General Meeting of ARU UCU Branch (March 12th 2021)

Overview

Branch membership has grown by 70% in the last five years and continues to grow, now approaching 450.

We have not lost a single disciplinary case in six years. With the last three reorganisations and cuts programmes, we have prevented compulsory redundancies at every turn.

The sustained, collective efforts of UCU colleagues at Cambridge School of Art ensured that the VC took action to address incompetent and bullying management of the school.

In March 2020, the Branch Executive took the unanimous decision to recommend the following motion to members:

1. This Branch recognises that there are mounting and serious challenges in HE in general and at ARU in particular.
 2. While the Branch successfully resisted compulsory redundancies in 2019, we anticipate further threats to job security and working conditions.
 3. Without a serious threat of collective action, management will have little incentive to accommodate our concerns.
 4. In order to have a serious chance of success, collective action needs to be targeted and well prepared.
 5. One of the key points of leverage in our possession is the ability to shut down lectures and classes.
 6. Crucial to our readiness to resist is the ability to build a reserve of funds to compensate colleagues who may be called upon to strike.
- In recognition of the above, ARU UCU Branch Executive recommends we increase the locally defined element of membership subscriptions to £5 per month.

The motion was carried, with 96% of votes cast in favour. From September 2021, the new levy took effect.

In addition, and again after overwhelming endorsement in a branch ballot, members voted to donate £3,000 as an expression of solidarity with our colleagues from Cambridge University UCU Branch who took 14 days of strike action in the winter of 2019-2020 in pursuit of the national campaign to secure higher pay, reasonable workloads, action against casualisation and equality at work. Our Branch achieved a clear majority for action in the national ballot, but as turnout fell just short of the required threshold, we were prevented in law from participating in the action. It was therefore our duty to bolster the action through the alternative means of providing financial support.

While the extent of our sacrifice was modest, colleagues at CUCU were very grateful. They continue to take a keen interest in our struggles and represent a very important constituency of support, most notably cementing connections with Daniel Zeichner, MP for Cambridge, and leading councillors on Cambridge City Council, concerned to hear of what is happening at ARU. There is no doubt that the meetings we held with these politicians during our official dispute in September 2020 over on-site working arrangements under Covid focussed minds and contributed to our successes.

Our balance, as of 18th February 2021 now stands at £12,125.57. As we build our funds, the capacity to enforce our collective will is strengthened.

With the Covid crisis, we were the first UCU branch to [declare an official dispute](#). We [won](#). This is a landmark agreement. We have a collective agreement which commits management to upholding the law and for there to be no detriment imposed upon any member of staff who considers on-site working to be a risk to their health. We are grateful to our UCU Regional Official, Lydia Richards, who provided expert support in negotiations, and the UCU branches and politicians (as noted above) who lent us their support. But above all, we thank members for their energy, trust and participation in driving us forward. The fact members turned out in record numbers at Branch meetings sent a very clear message to University management and strengthened the hand of our negotiating team.

The visibility of the Branch has also been enhanced by the ongoing and important work conducted on the Climate Emergency and the development of our social media presence, especially the use of Twitter (@AngliaRuskinUCU) and the newly established and growing Branch website (See: ucuaru.com).

We continue to extend our reach into ARU London, where full union recognition and collective bargaining remains our aim. Calling out racism and challenging the obscenity of casualisation are ongoing and intensifying campaigns, as we look to enforce equality and dignity at work by any means necessary.

The New Branch Executive

Further to the call for nominations of Branch Officers, see below for details of the posts that have been filled and without the need for a Branch ballot.

Branch Chair: John Hogan
Deputy Branch Chair (Casework Coordinator): Andy Noble
Social Media Coordinator: Felicity Clarke
Chelmsford Campus Rep: Adam Kenningham-Brown
Cambridge Campus Rep: Jane Aspell
London ARU Rep: vacant
Peterborough Campus Rep: vacant
Branch Secretary: Kerstin Hacker
Assistant Branch Secretary (Membership): Parveen Afzaal
Branch Treasurer: Julian Constable

Anti-Casualisation Officers: Diane Keeble- Ramsay and Meena Singh
Climate Emergency Officers: Felicity Clarke, Lizzy Ludlow and Victoria Tait
Equality Officers: Noah (Kofi) Karley
Pensions Officer: David Skinner
Learning Officer: vacant
Health and Safety Officers: Jade Moore, Andreja Zivkovic, James Butler and Jane Aspell

Note: Sarah Brown is an ex officio member of the executive, by virtue of being a member of the National Executive Committee.

The Branch negotiating team: John Hogan, Andy Noble, Felicity Clarke, Kerstin Hacker, Parveen Afzaal and Adam Kenningham-Brown.

There are a number of vacant positions. We want, in particular, volunteers to have their names put forward to be co-opted onto the executive, especially as faculty representatives. If colleagues interested would contact John Hogan at john.hogan@aru.ac.uk that would be much appreciated.

What is to be Done?

- **To defend job security and push back against casualisation**
- **To end the practice of unpaid labour through the establishment of a meaningful and fit for purpose AWBM**
- **To call out racism at work and promote equality for all**
- **To challenge arbitrary management decision-making, expose corruption and enforce transparency**
- **To promote health and safety at work**
- **To actively engage in Well-Being reviews and insist on the full disclosure of staff surveys**
- **To enforce the establishment of fair and equitable policies and procedures**
- **To insist on more visible and consistent commitment to zero carbon**
- **To build the union**

There is still much to be done. While our negotiators continue to challenge and check arbitrary management, there is a continued need to insist upon the establishment of fair and equitable policies and procedures. For example, we have been confronted with proposals to change the university's disciplinary process, such that Governors would be excluded from dismissal appeals, leaving the VC and delegated managers as sole decision-makers for both prosecution and appeal. This is unacceptable. We have made it clear that any departure from existing policy on this matter will inevitably result in the declaration of an official dispute.

The Branch continues to be alarmed by the tendency of some managers to drive through changes to working practices without proper consultation and negotiation. In particular, we remain concerned about PDT and the attempt to shift responsibility upon colleagues to

engage in the counselling of vulnerable students, without proper training and all the while suffering from assaults upon their own mental well-being. The Ruskin module initiative, although very promising in terms of ambition and the broadening of student education beyond narrow subject specialisms, is regarded by many as designed to fail, not least because no attention has been given to the implications for workload in having uncapped offerings. As for “Blended Learning”, while colleagues have tried their best to make it work, many of the shortcomings and limitations inherent in the approach taken could well have been anticipated and prevented if the progenitors of this gambit had bothered to engage with colleagues qualified to speak.

The capacity of colleagues to shape the university has been curtailed further by having to labour under immense pressure. The AWBM is not fit for purpose and fails to reflect the full extent of the work we do. Overwork is clearly demonstrated by the soaring levels of work-related stress, with absences placing the “survivors” under additional immense strain and vulnerable to illness. Admittedly, the University acknowledges the AWBM system is not fit for purpose. Productive discussions have been held to find a solution. However, this has been a very slow process. Greater urgency is required. The established allowances for preparation and marking need to be adjusted, to allow for academic standards and proper feedback to take place. The fact that colleagues often carry over annual leave must be factored into calculations for future workplans. Likewise, a substantial “head-room”, substantially below the 1585 target, is required to give space for flexibility. We should not be expected or forced into working for nothing. The University need to resolve this issue as a matter of utmost urgency. UCU has already signalled the warning. Time is running out.

It is perhaps inevitable that under-resourcing and workplace stress give rise to a dynamic for bullying and grievances. Our ability to address these problems requires, amongst other things, transparency and accountability. We know that the staff survey conducted a year ago produced spectacularly poor results. The fact that the University refused to permit the full and timely disclosure of results compounds the sense of collective grievance. Rather than being treated as respected professionals and valued colleagues, our collective voice, highlighting fundamental issues with the management of the university, is not being heard and our concerns are hidden away. We demand for the staff survey to be made public.

However, we know that poor leadership and management practice lead to needless suffering. Following tragic events earlier this academic year, UCU called once more for investigations into areas of the University which have been cause for concern over a considerable period. The Vice Chancellor responded swiftly and positively. As colleagues will know, a series of Well-Being Reviews is to be conducted, including in-depth qualitative investigations and further surveys. While the “pulse surveys” are perhaps somewhat superficial, the opportunity to speak in confidence with an outside investigator has the real potential to uncover poor practice and for colleagues to make their voices heard. In FBL, the first of such Well-Being Reviews is well underway and we are hopeful that clear and objective assessments will be derived from which positive change may be forthcoming. But, of course, we await the results of this pilot and will deliver our judgement about effectiveness and our continued participation accordingly.

In response to the gathering pace of the climate emergency, the branch and under the guidance of our dedicated representatives will continue to push for staff empowerment to incorporate sustainability in learning & teaching; stronger links with the local community, including sharing of resources; and, more visible and consistent commitment to zero carbon across our campuses.

UCU is hopeful about the prospects for positive change. There are University leaders who are providing encouraging signals. In the coming period, all UCU members are called upon to formulate and present concerns collectively. As a Branch, we are now entering a new phase. After having successfully mounted a series of defensive struggles, it is time to place our priorities to the forefront, to reclaim the University as a community dedicated to scholarship and social justice. We cannot rely upon the largesse of “our masters”, welcome as a sympathetic audience might be. Instead, we must remember that our ability to affect change lies with us, our collective organisation and our determination, ourselves alone.

ARU UCU Branch Executive

March 12th 2021