

Dear Colleagues,

On the morning of the Wednesday, December 13th, your negotiators met with senior university leaders to find a way of resolving the Official Dispute called by UCU on November 15th. Below is the statement presented by UCU. We shall update colleagues once we have clarification from our negotiators on how the talks progressed.

The following is our opening statement to the joint meeting held with university management, being held on December 13th 2023, to begin the process of discussing the best way to resolve the [Official Dispute called by UCU on November 15th](#).

Further to a meeting between the Vice Chancellor and the ARU UCU Branch President, followed by correspondence and the reflections of the branch executive, UCU welcomes the desire of the university to work with us in finding solutions. As the VC said, ***“we want to work constructively with you and all AHESs colleagues to ensure the best way forward for delivering the Creative Quarter development and associated office moves”***. So, it is clear, we are looking to resolve jointly the issues thrown up by the aborted attempt to remove colleagues from their offices in the Helmore building on Cambridge campus, as well as the concerns which arise across the campus and university more widely about the plans to realise the ambition of building a Creative Quarter.

In order to co-create a viable and lasting solution to the multiple challenges, UCU agrees that prolonged recriminations, about who is and who is not at fault, [about how and why senior colleagues are made to look foolish and what this tells us about gender politics in the institution](#), cannot serve any useful purpose in this setting or at this precise time. It is in this spirit that the Branch Executive wrote to the VC, ***“While misgivings and frustration expressed about the lack of consultation are genuine, on reflection we agree with you, it is better to confront the evident problems before us with a more sympathetic and understanding approach towards those who we might regard as failing in the execution of their duties.”***

UCU wants to go beyond failure and produce successful outcomes.

In order to move forward, the first task of the Disputes Resolution Meeting is to identify the issues that might divide us, along with the questions that require proper consideration and credible answers.

The best way to deliver the Cultural Quarter?

UCU is very concerned that the plans for the Cultural Quarter have not been circulated for discussion amongst staff in the faculty. We understand one of the Heads of School in the faculty was given the task, very late in the day, of setting up discussion groups. However, extraordinary effort seems to have been deployed in preventing UCU representation and in any case, these promised meetings failed to materialise.

The absence of consultation has been noted by our members, with the following capturing the consensus, ***“we wish to state our dismay that this decision, a move that will affect thousands of people at our university, staff and students, was made without discussion (and a vote) at Senate. With adequate consultation, forward-planning, and feasible suggestions of practical solutions, a compromise could be made, but the proposal as it stands is not possible and certain to have a grave impact on staff and students alike.”***

We understand that the project was originally projected to cost £30 million, only to hear the most recent estimate to be £60 million. Clearly, good planning must involve making sure there are sufficient resources in place to meet all costs involved. The university cannot rely on asking our members to absorb the costs of this major building project, for instance by forcing colleagues to work from home and to abandon offices instead of providing alternative temporary office accommodation. We would like to know how and why there has been such a massive leap in estimated costs, as well as seeing the safeguards put in place to prevent further inflation of the final

budget. UCU has, in principle, no objection to improving the estate of the university. What we object to is poor management and the squandering of our resources.

UCU is also concerned about the apparent absence of consultation with students and the Student Union. Our friends in the SU are very concerned student voices are being silenced. Given the proposal to turn the Cambridge campus into a building site, UCU is sympathetic to the demand that students living on campus during what will undoubtedly be a very disruptive experience, with noise and dust filling the air, should receive discounts on their rent and for adjustments to be made so as to compensate for the effects upon academic performance. What is more, our view is that the logic of the demand for reductions in fees for all students, who are asked to encounter sub-standard campus facilities and reduced opportunities to interact with academic staff, is very hard to resist.

Beyond the need to liaise and reach agreement with staff and students, UCU is very concerned to hear that the university has failed to consult openly and properly with our neighbours. It is apparent the traders surrounding Cambridge campus have not been alerted to the plans for major construction works, to be carried out over at least two years. The disruption to access roads, including the very busy Mill Road and East Road, will surely have an impact upon the ability of traders to operate.

We have also been saddened to hear the reaction of the local Diocese, who we understand held an emergency meeting after learning, albeit only through the grape vine, about the building works. With only a week to respond to the planning application, we have been told that nevertheless, such is their angst, objections and questioned have been lodged with the City Council. They have expressed surprise that ARU should behave in such an unneighbourly manner. And, so is UCU.

After inspecting some of the planning documents provided by the council, we have discovered that in answer to the direct question as to whether the Cultural Quarter development was part of a plan to increase student numbers, the university replied in the negative. How can this be so? The mantra that we should aim for ever increasing student numbers has been presented by senior university management at meeting after meeting for over two years, with the understanding there is no alternative if we are to remain solvent. What is going on?

Furthermore, why is it the case that the university has somehow omitted to mention the ambitious plans for the Cultural Quarter in marketing and PR materials? Are we to assume that it was decided that the process of getting the plans approved would run more smoothly with less, rather than more, scrutiny? What does this say about us as a university?

Evictions and Hot-Desking

Turning to the issue which gave immediate cause for concern, namely the announcement in November that all staff in the Helmore building would be required to empty and leave their offices by Christmas. Thankfully, following [our declaration of an official dispute](#), the [university retreated](#) from the original timetable. However, colleagues are still in the dark about what is being proposed as a way forward.

- The university would seem to be retaining the desire to deprive academics of their offices, for at least two years, while building work takes place, and probably on a permanent basis thereafter given what we have seen elsewhere in the institution. What is on offer currently is nothing more than “hot-desking”.
- When colleagues in the Helmore building were originally served notice of imminent eviction, with the expectation academics retreat into their homes, we were told renting portacabins and temporary office space would be too expensive. We would like Estates to be transparent about costs and possibilities.
- What calculations has the university made regarding the capacity of colleagues to work from home? The assumption that all academics can accommodate a suitable working space in their homes lacks credibility.
- Where are colleagues supposed to store their books and documents?
- How is the university going to deal with the clear problem, as evidenced from Timetabling and the room booking system, that there will be inadequate space available for colleagues to reserve private spaces for office hours, so crucial for giving students the support they need?
- With many academic staff having long waits between classes scheduled on the same day, what consideration has been given to the fact that there will be no space for them to work and rest between timetabled teaching?

- How is the university going to meet the observation that “hot-desking” undermines ARU’s claimed commitment to inclusivity and equality – in particular, though of course not exclusively, it fails to consider neurodiverse staff and students?
- What has the university done to address the fact that “hot-desking” could have a dreadful impact on student experience and wellbeing. It is so important for us to have private, confidential spaces in which to meet students, and urgent meetings, by their very nature, cannot be scheduled and booked in advance.
- How is the university going to address the concerns of students? As we pointed out in the Declaration of an Official Dispute, ***“AHESs students have already been in touch to express their anxieties about the situation. Student feedback so far has expressed the following: that a removal of private places on campus will lead to reduced confidence (amongst students) in expressing opinions, ideas and concerns; that data protection could be affected, as private (and confidential) conversations with staff could easily be overheard; that online (Teams) meetings are not as productive as on-campus conversations; and that staff office hours will become unreliable. Moreover, for our international MA and doctoral students, no longer being able to hold supervisions in-person could break government visa requirements and put the university’s sponsorship status at risk.”***

There are many more specific questions about the implications of “hot-desking” and the eviction of colleagues from their offices. We look forward to exploring the full extent of the relevant questions over the course of the many meetings which will be required to reach a position of resolution.

In the spirit of cooperation, we think it necessary to remind the university leadership of the facts as expressed in law and as rehearsed in the Official Declaration of Dispute. The attempt, unilaterally, to vary the express terms of our members’ contracts of employment relating to their place of work without their consent would constitute a fundamental breach of contract. Similarly, the proposed course of action constitutes a breach of the implied contractual terms in relation to the provision and operation of a safe system of work, and to the mutual trust and respect between employer and employee. Furthermore, if the removal of colleagues from their working spaces proceeds, this will constitute direct and/or indirect discriminatory treatment and/or harassment because of one or more of the Equality Act 2010 protected characteristics, primarily, but not limited to, sex and/or disability.

Under the terms of the recognition agreement between the University and UCU, as we are now in official dispute, the status quo prevails. Consequently, the university cannot enforce the eviction of colleagues from their offices unless and until a formal resolution is agreed.

We look forward to working with the leadership of the university to find a resolution. It will take time to get there, but we are confident that with goodwill and a commitment to seeking resolution based upon reason we can succeed together.

ARU UCU Branch Executive