



November 15th, 2023

Notice of Official Dispute

Dear Vice Chancellor,

Further to the revelation that AHES staff (based in Helmore) will be asked to clear their offices by the Christmas break, UCU has held meetings with a large number of distressed colleagues and students. The consensus is that certain elements within university management have revealed through their actions, including the abject failure to consult, utter contempt for staff and students.

The amateurism and disregard on display, raises a whole series of very important issues. The following observations by colleagues in AHES cover some, but certainly not all, of the concerns that a proper consultation would have explored,

The news follows long-term issues experienced by staff based in Helmore, from completely unreliable internet (the Wi-Fi has not worked properly for over a year, despite regular reports to IT) to offices being converted into emergency student accommodation, adjacent to working staff offices, leading to issues with security, lack of privacy (the situation is hardly ideal for the students) and even safety, following an act of vandalism last year. The recent news that we will no longer have office/working space, shared or otherwise, from January for at least two years (and likely longer), and that no alternative space is being provided, has made staff feel extremely unappreciated by the organisation. No advice or support has been offered for helping to move our belongings, and no storage solutions provided. Some staff have been based in Helmore for years and have hundreds of books and working materials. Many staff commute and no solutions have been posed to support transport and relocation costs.

The decision to abolish Helmore working spaces has failed to take many important considerations into account. The hasty timescale of the planned changes, and lack of proposed solutions, undermines ARU's claimed commitment to inclusivity and equality – in particular, though of course not exclusively, it fails to consider neurodiverse staff and students. It also assumes that all staff have adequate space and conditions to work from home, when this is not necessarily the case. The poor consultation on this matter has disregarded the mental health and general wellbeing of staff, in addition to their heavy workloads in service to the university. Many colleagues simply do not have the time and resources to clear their offices, let alone with no proposed alternative storage space on campus, in the next few weeks.

Importantly, it is of course not just staff who are affected so negatively by this announcement. The decision 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 often cannot be scheduled and booked in advance. We are very concerned that we will no longer be able to provide adequate support, and several 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.

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.

Vice Chancellor, it is with deep regret that ARU UCU has, as consequence of such poor management decision-making, been left with no alternative but to declare an official dispute, with immediate effect.

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. **UCU members are therefore advised that they are not compelled to cooperate with this most unreasonable set of demands outlined by AHESs faculty management.**

The behaviour of the [REDACTED], who has repeatedly stated a commitment to consult about proposed changes in office arrangements for academic staff only to press ahead with ill thought out deviations from extant practice, means that UCU has no confidence in his ability or willingness to produce a productive outcome. We have no desire to waste time in pointless discussions. The urgency of the situation and the pressing need to reach a settlement, suggests we must move straight to Stage II of the dispute resolution procedure and that therefore you must lead the university in our collective efforts to reach an amicable outcome.

ARU UCU Branch Executive