



December 13th, 2024

Dear Vice Chancellor,

Thanks for arranging a response to the concerns about the crisis in social work education at ARU-Peterborough (ARU-P), as expressed in our letter to you of December 6th, 2024 (see below).

The letter responding to our concerns, authored by the Principal of ARU-P (dated December 11th 2024) has been inspected and discussed. The entire UCU membership in the social work team at ARU-P, supported by the Branch Executive, are not satisfied with the response. The proposals for resolution of the crisis, if accepted, merely invites our colleagues to knowingly collaborate in the sabotage of standards for students and staff. This is not going to happen. In fact, as previously indicated, as of December 12th, the university has now been reported to Social Work England, the relevant professional regulatory authority.

As we indicated in our letter to you of December 6th, UCU wants to reach an amicable solution. But to reach that point, meaningful change is required. We also pointed out, **ARU UCU is throwing the full weight of the branch behind our colleagues. As the Chief Operating Officer has indicated the intention of the university to dissolve our extant dispute resolution procedure, we have been left with no choice but to take the immediate step of staging an indicative ballot of our members, to measure support for an all-out, indefinite strike, to begin in the new year. With a 100% turnout, we can report that such action has been endorsed unanimously. Likewise, the Branch Executive unanimously commits branch funds to compensate striking members for their loss of net earnings (with the exception of pension contributions) for the entire duration of the strike.**

In order to reach a resolution, we repeat our demand that you take personal responsibility for leading negotiations on behalf of the university. Devolving responsibility to the Principal and the Senior Leadership Team at ARU-P is not working. And why would it? They are, in essence, being asked to mark their own homework. By all means include them in negotiations. That is up to you. But the situation is urgent and requires swift action and credible leadership. Colleagues in social work find the response of the leadership at ARU-P thus far to be corrosive of their professional standards, insulting and deceptive. Failing to acknowledge their own responsibility and the attempts to blame the victims of their failure to manage properly (through for instance citing staff absence due to work-related stress as barriers to making appropriate reforms), the ARU-P senior leadership team is effectively making matters worse.

ARU UCU urges you to take control of the situation and to set aside time to lead negotiations, so that we can resolve the crisis before it is too late. In the meantime, the Branch Executive give notice that the branch has formally requested that UCU begin the balloting process for an all-out indefinite strike of our members in the social work team at ARU-P. In order to accelerate the negotiation process, UCU branch officers will be joined by our entire membership from social work at ARU-P. Furthermore, we reiterate the importance of including representation from the regulator, Social Work England. We trust that by working together, we can find a positive way forward.

We look forward to hearing from you.

ARU UCU Branch Executive



December 6th, 2024

Dear Vice Chancellor,

It has come to the attention of the UCU Branch Executive a major crisis is unfolding at ARU-Peterborough, where it is apparent that Social Work Education is being sabotaged.

Evidence of systematic under-resourcing, for both students and the academics who deliver our courses, has been presented. Management is failing to uphold the collective agreement on workload allocation and planning. There is a complete failure to acknowledge and account for the time needed to prepare teaching, engage in essential professional development and to comply with the statutory regulations governing the education and training of social workers.

Where problems have been expressed, colleagues are being ignored by senior managers. To take just one example reported to UCU, *“concerns raised about the quality of performance by an Associate Lecturer have gone totally ignored and it turns out that the concerns we raised led to zero action and the students he teaches have reported to me that he has essentially not been teaching them, while also providing feedback on placement work for which he has no training or authority. Something as simple as this which is easy to rectify has been ignored and unmanaged”*.

Regardless of whether the senior managers concerned are qualified to provide the leadership social work requires (something which we doubt), there is no question that the senior leadership team at ARU-Peterborough has been made well aware of the problems. Meetings have been held over many months, some in the presence of our branch President, with UCU

members raising concerns and providing numerous examples of malpractice and outlining clearly, over and over again, the real threat to our collective reputation and the continuing violation of our duty to students, partners, regulators and academic staff.

UCU has made it crystal clear that we want to see a timely, constructive and positive response to the demands for change. Our members are committed professionals in the field of social work. While senior leaders at ARU-Peterborough declare acknowledgement of this fact, actions do not match their rhetoric. Claims have been made about the university gaining approval for action plans from the relevant regulatory authorities. Yet, demands for full disclosure have to date not been met. Colleagues are asked to believe that it is somehow possible for their senior managers to engage in dialogue with the relevant external authorities when they, as social work educators and experienced practitioners, are excluded. It is astonishing that the senior leadership team at Peterborough, unequipped and in the absence of any known expertise of any sort, can conclude that they have the capacity to engage in any meaningful dialogue.

Inaction, temporising, obfuscation and even the outright denial of the crisis, have contributed to a wellbeing catastrophe in the social work team. We understand by the end of last week, two thirds of academic staff were absent due to ill health. Staff are being made sick by management failure.

If that was not bad enough, UCU is now aware that the university is responding to the honest and transparent presentation of concerns by colleagues, in what amounts to a protected disclosure as defined by the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, by processing what looks like a vexatious grievance. Subjecting a whistle-blower to a clear and obvious detriment, threatening health, professional reputation and job security contravenes our own stated values as a university. It is also an incredibly unwise gambit, given the very strong protection in law afforded to those who proclaim the truth and call out failure. When we are told of the need for economies, it beggars belief leaders should decide to expose us to potentially massive costs and financial damages in the courts. Thankfully, there is perhaps some comfort to know that individuals who knowingly process and present a detriment under the terms of the legislation are also personally liable for their actions.

Our members are dismayed by what they are witnessing. The predicted and predictable disintegration of the provision of social work education at ARU-Peterborough is recognised by the students. Management failure is placing their education experience in jeopardy. The failure of management to provide the resources necessary for the delivery of teaching, research and professional practice is being felt by students. Afterall, the working conditions of academics are the learning conditions of students.

This situation cannot be ignored. ARU-Peterborough stands accused of failing to ensure enough capacity to provide work placements for students. These are not some kind of fancy add-on. Students cannot qualify as trained social workers and therefore cannot practice as such, if they have not completed mandatory workplace training. In the rush to recruit students, to boost revenues by drawing in unsuspecting students, it is apparent management has failed to plan for and secure a sufficient number of work placements of an appropriate nature. Sending students off to do a spot of photocopying simply doesn't cut it. As one of our colleagues has said, *"There are a number of students who are at serious risk of failing to meet the statutory placement requirements necessary for qualification which is due to happen at the end of trimester two, at the end of April. We need action now. I am afraid we may already be too late to save the day."* Who is going to compensate students for the inevitable loss of income if the proper enforcement of standards results in delays to graduation? More alarmingly, who is going to take responsibility if and when it is revealed, during a public inquiry for instance, harm has befallen a vulnerable member of the public who has the misfortune to be under the care of an inadequately trained social worker?

Vice Chancellor, this is serious. ARU-Peterborough is part of our university. You need to deal with this. Our members have blown the whistle and you need to listen and to act.

ARU UCU is throwing the full weight of the branch behind our colleagues. As the Chief Operating Officer has indicated the intention of the university to dissolve our extant dispute resolution procedure, we have been left with no choice but to take the immediate step of staging an indicative ballot of our members, to measure support for an all-out, indefinite strike, to begin in the new year. With a 100% turnout, we can report that such action has

been endorsed unanimously. Likewise, the Branch Executive unanimously commits branch funds to compensate striking members for their loss of net earnings (with the exception of pension contributions) for the entire duration of the strike. In compliance with the law and our own UCU regulations, the exact date for the commencement of action in early 2025 is yet to be determined.

UCU wants an amicable settlement and to avoid unnecessary open conflict. However, we are not going to tolerate any further temporising or the degradation of standards. It is not good for our members, our students and our university. The crisis is here and now. As you have quite rightly said, Vice Chancellor, when we see failure, we at ARU all need to find solutions. To move forward, UCU proposes that you take personal responsibility to lead ARU in negotiations with our team, and that representatives from Social Work England, the professional regulatory authority concerned, are invited to participate and contribute to the search for a solution.

We look forward to hearing from you.

ARU UCU Branch Executive