



Unpaid work driving Queen's students to desperation – UCU report

Doctoral students at Queen's are working unpaid or under minimum wage for the university. This is the startling key finding of a new report commissioned by the University College Union (UCU), which will be launched tomorrow, Tuesday 25th October.

'The situation is intolerable,' claims PhD student representative Morris Brodie, who is part of the union's committee at Queen's. 'Students need this work to get necessary skills that will advance their careers, but feel that this need is being exploited by Queen's.'

'The report clearly shows that many students are finding the pressures placed on them by the university too much to bear. They are desperate. Queen's routinely underestimates the hours it takes to prepare for teaching and marking work in particular, which means that doctoral students are effectively working for free in jobs that keep this massively wealthy institution afloat. Highly skilled and hard-working doctoral candidates are employed on less than the minimum wage. This is a disgrace.'

The report, titled 'Undervalued. Overworked. Taken for Granted' analyses the data generated by a survey of 247 graduate students from all faculties in the Spring of 2016. Overall, it claims that students at the university feel 'exploited and overlooked'. In their anonymous responses to survey questions, students outline how they feel frustrated with how the university treats them. 'Payment that does not reflect our effort and expertise is demoralising', one says. Another claims that Teaching Assistants (TAs) are 'afraid' to speak out due to fear of losing their jobs.

Others cite late payment or lack of payment for work completed, excessive workloads and tough deadlines. Disturbingly, one student claims that she has turned to sex-work to pay fees. She alleges that others are doing likewise. 'The university does not wish to address the issue of female students, many in financial crisis and from working-class backgrounds with no access to credit, working in the sex industry.'

UCU President at Queen's Dr Fabian Schuppert said today that overall the survey reveals a 'deeply unwise approach of the university toward the PhD body'.

'Just over 40 per cent of respondents declared that they are expected to do work for which they don't receive any pay. It is unthinkable that a university should be treating students in this way,' Schuppert said. 'As concerns those actually paid for their important work, the report highlights the extreme inequality of treatment between students from different schools; for instance, as concerns the compensation for marking exams. Even more alarmingly, for TAs, the payment never fully corresponds

to the time they devote to this crucial work. The most disconcerting result of the research consists in showing how the compensation for the PhDs' work is in most cases under the minimum wage. It also means that their students are getting a bad deal; poor pay and rushed workloads have inevitable effects on teaching and assessment.'

The crisis in casualisation at universities extends well beyond Queen's. The results of a similar survey conducted on a UK level in 2013 explained how 'on average, the respondents worked twice as many hours per week as they were paid for, downsizing the average "real hourly wage" to approximately £10, with a third of those surveyed working for less than £6.19 per hour, the National Minimum wage for over 21-year-olds.' At QUB, TAs are supposed to be paid £34 per hour, but survey launched this week reveals that they spend an average of 5.5 hours alone on the preparation of each class. Consequently, the final pay for hourly work is well under the minimum wage, which is currently £7.20 for over 25-year-olds.

The report provides a telling picture of the overall situation, and building on this analysis, its authors have produced a series of recommendations to Queen's on how to improve PhD students' employment conditions.

'There are really five key issues,' Brodie says. 'Firstly, we need to stop unpaid marking. It's just wrong that any work at any university should go unpaid. Secondly, there should be no such thing as unpaid office hours—currently teaching assistants can be expected to provide advice hours to their students, unpaid. This is clearly wrong.'

'Another serious issue is that payment for marking of student assessments and examinations needs to recognise the actual time it takes to complete these tasks. At the moment, again, the university benefits financially by underestimating how long these tasks take.'

'A fourth issue is about transparency and consistency: all departments need to pay students the same, fair pay for the same amounts of work.'

'And lastly, we need the university to support a stronger PhD student body, which can help the university thrive in a competitive international environment and develop better student-staff relations locally here at Queen's. We want to make Queen's a better place to work and study for students and staff. Paying us under the minimum wage is clearly very bad for morale and it's causing students a lot of stress and worry.'

The 'Undervalued. Overworked. Taken for Granted' report is the result a joint initiative between the UCU and SU (Students' Union) at Queen's. 'The increasingly strong links between the two unions indicates a significant advancement for activism at QUB,' Schuppert says.

'This partnership has already led to the recent victory over the threats of closure to the BAs in Anthropology and Sociology, and we're determined to protect graduate students, who often feel vulnerable and isolated at Queen's. Our anti-casualization strategy will have to look not only at PhD students but at the precarious situation of academic and academic-related staff more generally.'

ENDS.

For further comment, Dr Schuppert can be contacted on f.schuppert@qub.ac.uk