QUB Faces a deepening recruitment and retention crisis, and thus the uncertainty surrounding the next VC and the imminent departure of our registrar might be serious cause for concern. However, this is also an opportunity for positive change, building on the things we do well and improving in areas where we struggle.

James O’Kane’s decision to resign came as a major surprise for most staff at Queen’s. The fact that the Registrar will leave in April 2018 and thus most likely before our next VC has started their job at Queen’s, means that Queen’s is in a serious time of transition. On the one hand, a transitional period at a time when the University experiences an ever deepening crisis in the under-staffing of its academic departments seems like a daunting prospect; on the other hand, this radical transition, eight months after QUB also had a new Head of Human Resources take up his job here, is also a unique opportunity for constructive and forward-looking change. Queen’s is a great institution but the actual work environment and culture around our University has rapidly deteriorated in recent years, which is something that has also significantly affected Queen’s reputation as a trustworthy employer. It is high time to push for a major cultural change around Queen’s, as doing so will also provide the key to solving the most serious issue the University faces at the moment: its major retention and recruitment crisis.

The best way to retain staff is to provide the kind of positive and rewarding work environment that will ensure that staff don’t feel the need to look for jobs elsewhere in the first place. As the Staff Survey showed this is an area in which Queen’s has struggled majorly. Thus, a lot of talented staff have left Queen’s over the past 24 months, while at the same time Queen’s has struggled to recruit qualified staff. Hence, the retention and recruitment crisis has reached breaking point, as fewer staff struggle to deliver programmes to students, with staff-student ratios in many areas across the University on the rise and the University’s academic vacancy rate hovering around 10%, far above the University’s 5% target level.

This crisis has been years in the making. Recruiting senior academics has been a problem at Queen’s for well over 12 months. The fact that at the same time senior management thought the fastest way to address the professorial gender pay gap was to hire range 3 or range 4 female professors, is baffling to say the least.

On top of that, the uncertainty surrounding the future of EU citizens...
post-Brexit UK and the marketisation of the HE sector in the UK have led to a decrease in applications from qualified non-UK applicants. At the same time, the Staff Survey more than a year ago highlighted academics were being driven away by a top down and punitive management culture and a lack of career progression, especially for women.

Despite highlighting these issues with the most senior levels of management, UCU has seen no tangible response to a problem that threatens Queen’s at the most basic level. In short, if Queen’s cannot either retain staff or effectively replace them when they leave, then the institution risks its reputation as a world class institution capable of delivering excellent research and teaching. With a vacancy rate standing at around 10%, and staff shortages reported across all three faculties, the picture is not improving.

So what are the unique conditions that make it so difficult to recruit at Queen’s and to stop people from applying for jobs elsewhere, which is after all the best way to retain staff? Well, clearly those that leave tell us something important: that the management of the University has been experienced negatively by its staff. When those people move on, the Schools they leave behind lose capacity and often have to distribute the work amongst the remaining staff with little or no extra resource to bridge the gap. Overwork and stress are inevitably the result, hardly the best conditions for innovation and excellence.

Academics leaving the University also take their stories of poor experiences with them and this spreads quickly across the sector, making it more difficult to attract the very best new colleagues (as well as to stop colleagues from leaving Queen’s) several steps should be taken swiftly:

- **Address quickly and directly the feedback provided and again by staff and the UCU about inappropriate management decisions - reversal or substantial re-thinking are the order of the day, not tinkering at the edges.**
- **Conduct detailed exit interviews with all leavers and listen carefully to the results, ensuring that action is taken on all issues that lead to the loss of staff.**
- **Remove onerous business planning and bidding procedures for the replacement of much-needed staff, growth can only be considered once essential provision has been achieved.**
- **Appoint a VC and a Registrar who are qualified to address the particular challenges that Queen’s faces**

Bold action is required and fast. The time to act is now and while the end of an era is always also a time of contemplation about what happened in the past, as a University we need to seize the opportunity to make Queen’s a great place to work as well as an excellent university for students and research alike. Staff have generously provided answers to the many questions that plague this institution and will gladly help in making the necessary changes. All that’s needed now is a sign from the QUB leadership that they can deliver the radical change required.

The results are in and the Athena SWAN committee decided to say ‘no’ to QUB’s application for an institutional Gold Award. Despite some excellent results at School level, Queen’s is left with questions to answer about why its programme for change was not powerful enough to win the approval of the SWAN committee.

The application for Gold was the product of many months of work, by very many people across this University and the exact reasons why the final submission failed to hit the mark are yet to be shared with this body of staff. Having said that, we can be reasonably sure of some of them. Throughout the period of preparation for submission, UCU consistently called for a series of significant changes that we, as a Union, felt would get to the heart of the existing inequalities in our University and make it a more equal place to work. We recommended:

- a wide-reaching and ambitious approach to resolving the gender pay gap, which is the largest in the sector at professorial level
- the equality-proofing of Academic Standards, including the removal of Teaching Evaluation Questionnaires from personnel decision-making and the removal of individualised grant income targets. Evidence shows that both of these practices can result in discrimination.
- urgent action on progression, promotion and retention of staff, a challenge underlined by the number of staff leaving Queen’s, the substantial standing vacancy rate and unacceptable levels of casualisation in our workforce.

Unfortunately our proposals did not make the final cut. Whilst there is no doubt that important discussions were had about all these same issues in SWAN meetings, the final Action Plan submitted did not go far enough. Rather than removing Teaching Evaluation Questionnaires from personnel decision-making (at probation and promotion), Queen’s merely committed to ‘gender-proofing’ them, an action that is simultaneously impossible and of little use to the early career researcher at her probation panel meeting with scores under a 4. Similarly, on gender pay inequality, the Action Plan referenced a proposal that had been rejected by a majority of female professors after what was described as an ‘entirely inadequate’ consultation with management. On issue after issue, senior members of our University did not listen carefully enough to staff — who had positive proposals to make, proposals that might well have satisfied SWAN that Queen’s could be gold standard when it comes to equality.

Whilst this result is disappointing, it should not become disheartening. On the contrary, as a University we now have to think big in terms of the changes we can make today for a more equal workplace tomorrow. The proposals are still there, backed by a weight of evidence, the only thing we are missing is the guts to go all the way. If Queen’s can take radical steps on equality issues, steps that change our sector for the better, then we can earn that Gold Award and become the ‘beacon of achievement’ that Athena SWAN expects us to be.
By Paul Hudson

Virtually all academic and related staff in Queen’s are in the USS pensions scheme and a new valuation could lead to a multi-million pound bill. What will staff costs mean for Queen’s?

Many employers want to cut drastically the pensions benefits in the USS scheme or even to scrap the USS altogether. Members would then have their future provision of pension only if they paid the full costs of the plan.

The Supreme Court ruling can be the point of departure for our collective action. The refund due is typically an hourly strike, but for the rest of the day the member was entitled to be paid the same, or to report a colleague’s resistance to payment. The Supreme Court ruling can be the point of departure for our collective action.

The refund due is typically an hourly strike, but for the rest of the day the member was entitled to be paid the same, or to report a colleague’s resistance. The refund due is typically an hourly strike, but for the rest of the day the member was entitled to be paid the same, or to report a colleague’s resistance to payment.
The Irish language has made it way to the very centre of the political discourse in the north and the emerging crisis at Stormont. Moreover, the inactivity to comprehensively deal with the issue of Irish language rights has become a major stumbling block and effectively a ‘red-line’ issue for some of the main political parties that must be progressed before the power-sharing institutions can be resurrected again. As one prominent journalist described it, the Irish language and the formal recognition of Irish identity in the northern state has become ‘the new one million Gaelic speakers in the late 1840’s, and survived preserving millennia of shared linguistic tradition, and ensured the survival of the language. Overcoming enormous challenges in the late 1830’s, accelerating a demographic and cultural decline unparalleled in European history. Despite this, commendable and effective efforts were made to preserve our native language and culture, from the Presbyterian-led movement of the 18th century, to formation of Comhrad na Gaeltar in 1863, whose first President and many leading members were protestant. These efforts undoubtedly bolstered the revival and ensured the survival of the language.

Any minority community engaged in a struggle for rights and recognition are quite consciously involved in “political activism” and do not agree with the removal of this or their campaign. As many language communities across Europe and throughout the world will testify, it is the denial and disavowal of rights which is controversial and ‘political’ and not the assertion of those rights. The right and opportunity to ‘learn and speak a language’ is a right fundamental and a human right, and should be protected and preserved. The Irish language has been a central part of the cultural heritage which has shaped our place names, surnames and even how we speak English. However, the simplest and compelling reason to implement an act is that an Irish Language community exists in the North. We are a community that speak Irish, that fully support the development of adequate resources for Irish, that learn about the world through Irish, and we are a community that has underwent monumental growth in the last few years (it is estimated that the 6,000 people who use the Irish medium education system in the North will double in the next 7 years).

At present, this community has no legal protection in the same way as Welsh speakers in Wales do, for example. Therefore, the state has the power to ignore the Irish Language Community or to oppress it, and no legal mechanism exists to address this. Painful experience has shown us time and again that we can put no faith or trust in the good-will officials and many of our elected politicians to do the right thing for the language.

We need a legislative framework that places clear, unambiguous responsibilities on all government departments and official while removing any scope for petty political prejudices driving decision making. As the Justice Maguire recently noted in the Conradi na Gaeltar judicial Review victory at Belfast’s High Court, “political allegiance can be an excuse for dismissing questions relating to the Irish language.” A Language Act is only one ‘pillar’ in the overall design of language revitalisation. The Language Protocols launched in Donostia last year and endorsed by over 200 language NGO’s recently noted in the Conradh na Gaeilge judicial Review victory at Belfast’s High Court, ‘political allegiance can be an excuse for dismissing questions relating to the Irish language.’
Sixteen months have passed since the EU Membership Referendum in 2016, and UK residents are none the wiser about what the process of exiting the European Union will entail, or how their citizenship, rights, and economic conditions will be transformed in the short or long term. This perpetuated uncertainty deeply affects University staff, who, even in cases when they are not the most precarious of workers (when they have permanent, full-time employment), find issues of residency and working rights, as well as mobility and research opportunities, tightly bound to the stakes of the fragile negotiations between the UK government and EU officials.

When the result became known, Queen's University was quick to declare that it will strive to ensure the continuity of EU research funding, as well as to maintain the flow of students from continental Europe, but it has been worryingly reserved when it comes to reassuring staff (domestic, EU, or overseas) about their rights post-Brexit. In its 'EU Exit Institutional Position Paper', the University’s senior managers articulate the importance of EU staff for the institution's research and educational environment, and 'suggest the retention of the current rights for all current and future EU nationals at the University' (p.6), but express no commitment or action plans to support their staff during the transitional period or thereafter (see also piece by Dagmar Schiek in our April 2017 Newsletter).

Following its commitment to develop campaigns on the ground and engage members in identifying and advancing collective causes, Queen's UCU initiated a 'Brexit Workgroup', which has been meeting to discuss the challenges that colleagues envisage in relation to the process of EU exit. We made clear early on that this was not an 'Anti-Brexit' group, insofar as neither UCU nationally nor our members locally have a uniform view on the UK's membership in the EU. However, discussions at the Workgroup revealed that the feeling of employment precariousness and the uncertainty about working rights post-Brexit cut across political affiliations, nationalities, and seniority levels. Granted, some working rights and conditions depend on the transformation of labour legislation after the disentanglement from the EU, the nature of which will be defined by political powers and campaigns well beyond this institution. Colleagues, however, identified some minimum actions that QUB could take, in order to both improve the experiences of EU and other international staff during this transitional period, and show a commitment to supporting them in the future.

The most pressing issue that emerged was the inconsistency with which different units at QUB deal with their employees' visa, residency, and welfare access issues. Here the testimonies of overseas, non-EU, academic and support staff were telling: some had received sound advice and bureaucratic support at School level, while others were not only left unaided, but their units had not even afforded them minimum workload flexibility while they were dealing with such issues, for themselves or their families. If the final removal of the UK from the EU results in additional levels of bureaucracy, costs, and requirements for EU staff in order to remain and have the right to work in the UK, QUB will face an increased volume of requests for assistance. Therefore, as a minimum, Queen's senior management needs to consider ways of improving the support that it provides to all international staff, and ensuring the consistency of good practice across units. Furthermore, the establishment of a robust, central, international staff office, which could deal with immigration issues for EU and overseas staff, would help to streamline and solidify support.

As the largest HEI in the North of Ireland, Queen's holds a unique position when it comes to the post-Brexit academic landscape. Its well-established connection with institutions across the border, which will remain within EU funding and mobility networks, could make it an attractive place for leading academics in the UK and internationally. This is imperative given the issues that QUB has been facing with regards to recruiting and retaining staff (see Editorial of this issue). In order for QUB to make the most of its unique position after Brexit, however, it needs to devise a strategy that will attract new (and retain existing) colleagues, at the very least by remedying the low staff satisfaction rates and committing to avoid any discrimination against EU applicants or current employees.

When this workgroup was set up, we never envisaged that academic freedom might be a Brexit-related concern. This week's revelations, however, that Tory whip Chris Heaton-Harris wrote to university Vice-Chancellors across the country to ask them to identify staff who teach on Brexit and provide the relevant syllabi, gives a gruesome sneak peek into the world of authoritarian dystopia that some right-wing Eurosceptics are hoping to engineer. With regards to this sinister threat on educational autonomy, we welcome our Acting Vice-Chancellor’s response which refrained from engaging with the politician’s witch hunt. We further invite the institution’s senior management to keep in close consultation with UCU and relevant academics regarding efforts from power holders that seek to manipulate or silence our teaching and research on Brexit.