

**Queen's University Belfast and
University and College Union at QUB
Joint Statement – 1 July 2022**

Introduction

The Vice-Chancellor and the Leadership Team are committed to working in partnership with the Trade Unions to make the University a better place to work for all.

The industrial dispute raised by the UCU and prompted by concerns on pay, working conditions and pensions is acknowledged and understood.

On pay and pensions we are committed to national negotiations, and we will use our representation in the negotiating bodies (UUK and UCEA) to support a swift resolution of the disputes.

There are also several areas where it is within our collective gift to make changes – changes that will make a real difference to all our staff. The University Leadership Team are committed to the delivery of positive change, as outlined in the ambition of Strategy 2030.

The strategy will only be delivered by the people of Queen's working together in an environment where they feel valued and can give of their best to make a difference. Progress has been made on many issues, however, there is still much to do.

We are committed to working in partnership to deliver against our shared ambitions. The University and QUB UCU reinforce the importance of ongoing dialogue and working together in partnership to build a better University.

Pensions

The University shares a common interest with UCU and USS members in that it also believes the scheme should be sustainable, affordable to both the University and the member, and provide the best possible benefits for members.

The 2023 valuation of the scheme should be undertaken with evidence based, moderately prudent assumptions, which recognise the strength of the HE sector and participating employers. In anticipation of a more positive valuation in 2023, the University will encourage UUK to undertake advance work, exploring options for benefit reform and planning to enable speedy implementation in that event. Recent inflation rises have created an urgent need to examine the impact of the CPI cap and the level at which it is set currently.

All parties - UUK, UCU and the USS Trustee - are to be encouraged to work collaboratively and transparently, using an evidence-based approach. Should the 2023 valuation show an improved funding position for the scheme, improving benefits for USS members should be given priority.

The University will continue to provide enhanced covenant support for any proposals formally presented and agreed through negotiations at the USS Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC).

In the event of further changes to USS, the University will again undertake its own equality screening exercise and will call for a sector-wide equality impact assessment (EQIA) to be undertaken by the USS Trustee to ensure that any disproportionate impacts on members with protected characteristics are identified and mitigations put in place. The University commits to increased transparency by sharing position on USS issues upon submission.

Recognising the high numbers of eligible staff across the sector currently opting out of USS, the University and UCU support work at a national level to attract more people to join USS to earn valuable pension benefits, including the development of a lower cost option.

UUK and UCU should continue the joint work on governance reform in USS as a matter of urgency, which should include serious consideration of the Joint Expert Panel recommendations.

UUK and UCU are encouraged to continue the joint work on possible future benefit structures for the scheme, recognising the value to members of a substantial defined benefit element of the pension scheme and also including exploration of conditional indexation.

The University will use its influence in the collective employer position in future negotiations and national level work relating to USS and will encourage UUK to engage constructively with UCU and the USS Trustee.

Pay

National Pay Negotiations

The current pay dispute relates to the 2021 offer and the 2022 process is still in train. The University will write to UCEA urging the adoption of a flexible approach to reach a meaningful and sustainable solution for all parties in respect of the current round of pay negotiations. This action recognises, like other sectors, pay has not kept pace with inflation in recent years.

Living Wage

The University has committed to joining the Living Wage Foundation, and work is progressing to ensure we pay this higher hourly rate, currently £9.90, as a minimum for all employees, by the end of this calendar year. This will be backdated to 1 August 2022. The Voluntary Living Wage for workers will be implemented by the end of 2022.

Recognition Payment

The University recognises the commitment, flexibility, and professionalism that staff have demonstrated over the past two years of the pandemic.

To this end, the University is developing plans to offer staff a one-off unconsolidated payment. The University is consulting with the recognised Trade Unions on the detail of this proposal.

This is in addition to the Performance Awards process which will continue to operate with the increased budget initiated during the pandemic.

Fixed Term

The University is in the process of making permanent all posts that were appointed as fixed term during the pandemic, where the rationale for fixed term was solely uncertainty on future income streams due to Covid.

Faculties have brought forward a range of posts that have been engaged on a fixed term basis for several years due to being funded from reserves. These posts are now being made permanent and moved to core funding. A similar exercise is taking place for the Directorates.

Non-research staff

The University is in the process of making permanent those contracts for non-research staff with more than 4 years' service where they have had at least one contract extension or renewal.

In general, the University will work to reduce the use of non-research fixed term contracts over the next academic year with the aim of offering contracts of more than 2 years duration only in exceptional circumstances.

Research staff

As a component of the Research Culture Action Plan, the University will explore in partnership with UCU, the opportunities for reform of the use of fixed term contracts in the research environment. In doing so, best practice in UK HE in this area will be analysed and whenever possible applied at Queen's.

This project will seek to develop clear criteria for identifying and transitioning appropriate research staff to permanent employment where funding permits and achieve a reduction in that the percentage of research staff on fixed term contracts. The University will initiate this review in the next academic year.

This is part of a wider programme aimed at enhancing and expanding the career development experiences and opportunities for research staff, particularly those employed on fixed term contracts, with a focus on tailoring advice, guidance, and support for staff with these skills.

Casualised Workers

Agreement has recently been reached between the University and UCU on issues relating to the payment of Teaching Assistants.

The University will endeavour, to ensure that workers will be transitioned from QWork onto fractional contracts, where the relationship is more akin to that of an employee for the new academic year. As set out in the Extended Workforce [policy](#) this is likely where the worker is covering work that is no longer considered to be:

- carrying out non-permanent or intermittent services, as and when required;
- preventing the disruption of service delivery by covering short term staff absences; or
- providing additional support, skills and experience to meet fluctuating demands.

All training which is essential to a specific role will, of course, be undertaken in work time and paid accordingly.

Workload

It is recognised that heavy workloads have had a detrimental impact on staff health and wellbeing.

The University will build on the work carried out to date by the Workload Allocation Working Group, which developed workload allocation principles and operational guidance, and endorsed the procurement of the online work allocation system, Simitive.

Simitive is under procurement and a project manager will be recruited to manage its implementation.

Going forward, the purpose of the Working Group, operating to revised terms of reference, is to review academic workload, identifying core issues driving unsustainable workloads, and to make recommendations to address these issues at the start of the new academic year.

It is recognised that there are also workload issues within professional services, however, given that the working group proposals may themselves impact on professional services, this will be considered as phase 2 of the group's work. Notwithstanding, there are significant professional services posts within the Strategy 2030 investment and the Digital Programme will, over time, also produce efficiencies that will change professional services workload.

Alongside this, Faculties and Schools are working to recruit staff. The University is reviewing the financial model to allow flexibility in resourcing.

The operational plan of Strategy 2030 was considered and approved by Senate on 21 June, providing significant investment in additional staff, both academic and professional services to support our shared ambitions for the University.

Values, Behaviours and Wellbeing

The University has invested in staff health and wellbeing posts and is now developing a strategy based on the staff feedback. The University acknowledges that the issues outlined in this document in respect of pay, casualisation, pensions, and workload, have an impact on health and wellbeing.

The University reaffirms its commitment to work with UCU on those issues.

A Staff Charter, which describes the practical application of our core values, translating them into relevant scenarios within our daily working lives, has been developed.

The Charter, which was widely consulted on, has been developed with our staff and the behaviours described are relevant for everyone who works at Queen's.

The University Executive Board very recently approved the approach and plans to launch the Charter are underway. This is the first step in a wider shared ambition to influence our culture, to enable and sustain a positive working environment that allows all our people to deliver their best.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

UCU, other trade union colleagues and the University have worked closely over the last two years ensuring that the voices of staff, particularly around issues relating to equality, diversity and inclusion have been raised, heard and acted upon.

We welcome this continued approach.

Putting staff matters at the centre of institutional policy decision making, whether these are issues of LGBTQ+ inclusion, gender and race equality, language rights, the move to agile working, clinical vulnerability, caring responsibilities, sexual harassment, fertility treatment or the menopause – is key to our working life at Queen's.

It is also recognised that while the last triennial Equal Pay Audit (2020) showed that there was an improving picture, institutionally there is work to do to reduce pay gaps across the University further.

- Institutional Equal Pay Gap (2020): 18.1% (was 20.4% in 2017)
- Professoriate Equal Pay Gap (2020): 7.6% (was 10.5% in 2017)

The University is committed to delivering on equal pay and its Equal Pay Action Plan sets out how this would be done, through engagement with colleagues and Union representatives.

A new task and finish group with trade union representation which will be created to further reduce the institutional equal pay gap. This group will examine all avenues through which pay inequalities can be reduced as far as possible – ideally eliminated.

The continuous development of equality, diversity and inclusion features prominently in Strategy 2030. Collaborating on these issues, which can be complex, is undoubtedly the best approach.

Career Progression

The University has been working in collaboration with UCU to improve the academic probation and progression processes over the past number of years, however, recognises that further work is also required to improve the career development opportunities of professional services staff, staff on an Education and Scholarship pathway and research staff. The University is committed to reviewing its policies, the academic profiles, and the academic progression process, to ensure there is a consistent and equitable approach.

The University will also explore further measures for professional services and research staff to support their career development and advancement. The University will reconvene the Professional Services Development Group which will develop, implement, and monitor impact of initiatives to support the career progression of this cohort.