
◆ AGORA ◆

Newsletter of the Aberdeen University and College Union

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Events.....

Alex Arthur, AUCU President explains how and why the next three to five years are going to be among the most difficult the institution has faced in recent history.

A cut of more than 12% in the Scottish Funding Council grant for 2011/12 will feed through as a cut of nearly 6.5% for the University Sector. We are being slightly protected. The FE sector, as ever, is expected to continue to walk on water.

The Scottish Executive wishes to preserve research quality and student numbers. The explicit prioritisation of volume in its ambitions for teaching cannot be accidental. Staff and student concerns over the way quality is managed and rewarded in HE teaching have been repeatedly and explicitly presented to policy makers. They clearly continue to regard it as a secondary concern.

The University is in a much better position entering this round of cuts than it was when it had to manage the funding constraints in the 1980s. Its finances are stronger, its reputation has improved, and it is better managed. The Principal, showing more foresight than his funding masters, has explicitly committed the institution to rewarding teaching quality. The fundamental civilizing mission of a University requires inspired pedagogy as well as inspired discovery. It is not, of course, financially invulnerable, reputationally immaculate, or perfectly managed.

There will be a lot of choices to make as the consequences of the financial crisis work through the sector and the institutions within it. Mistakes will be made and opportunities will be missed.

To minimise these, the University needs to draw on as wide a range of expertise as is available to it. Not a problem, one might imagine, since expertise, after all, is our core business.

Somehow, for reasons that are occasionally painful to reflect on, this isn't always the way things work. Academics may be unsurpassed at predicting and analysing catastrophes, but their contribution to practical prevention has been less sure-footed. Perhaps some nostalgia for the intellectual freedom of the gentlemen amateur makes us reluctant to tangle with Hamlet's dilemma.

But we must, after all, take arms.

The proposed changes to the USS – unnecessary and very damaging for the new generation of academics we need to motivate and support – could be a very visible flash point.

Out of the spotlight, there are dozens of minor engagements – reviewing promotion policies, negotiating changes to the University's ordinances, participation in the University's redundancy avoidance processes, and a steady stream of individual members who have found themselves in difficulties over employment related issues.

I will not pretend to defend every single one of the UCU's national policies, nor every method it has chosen to pursue them. But the value of the UCU very substantially outweighs any reservations I have about these. And these policies and methods can be changed through participation, even if all you do is vote!

Volunteering

Most of our local activity – personal case support, participation in working groups, engagement with national structures (both UK and Scottish) - is supported by a very small group of volunteers. **We would be very pleased to have you join us.**

“We can tailor your participation to your capacities, resources, and interests. We can't guarantee you won't be hooked, but we can help you to manage your addiction if you are!” Mike McConnell (Honorary Secretary)

The University has a very positive attitude towards the UCU, and values the contribution that it makes to policy making and employment processes. An enlightened management will value the engagement of many different constituencies, and will support the kind of communication strategies which promote this.

The changes which the sector and the institution will soon be going through will make this engagement more than valuable – it will become an essential part of preserving what is best about what we all do.

If you'd like to be part of this, send Alex an e-mail, or give him a call - arthur@abdn.ac.uk, Tel: 07711 265095

Rubbish

By Steven Lawrie

Just in time for Christmas the University decided to stage a hilarious pantomime, featuring Estates in one of the lead roles, and having as its topic the partial removal of University cleaning services and the sudden disappearance of rubbish bins from staff offices.

This might sound a little like a whodunit, but there is no mystery (beyond the startling absence of common sense) to this plot. However, at least Estates is honest about the motive for the abolition of rubbish bins and of the staff to empty them, for Estates indicates on its web page that this measure is primarily a means to cut the payroll - rather than to save the environment. That merits a clear thumbs up to Estates for honesty.

It is difficult to resist a certain amusement as one watches this farce unfold and the principle is upheld that it would be wrong to backtrack on a decision once it had been made. There is certainly some wisdom in this position, for how ridiculous would the University look if it had to admit to having made the wrong decision? Rather than u-turning and looking daft, it is certainly far better to stride with conviction further down that bin-free road and instead look—ehm—daft.

There are, however, some fringe benefits to the madcap removal of bins, although not necessarily for the environment. In a recent conversation one of the porters was heard to utter the suggestion that the DIY bin scheme “widnae work”, as it had previously and unsuccessfully been tried, whereby the separate bins were regularly “contaminated” by the insertion of the wrong type of rubbish. The fringe benefits lie, rather, in the great entertainment value of this episode, which has so far been of great hilarity to students when explained to them. If the University wants amused students, this was the right way to achieve the goal. It might not be wrong to propose that a number of staff are enjoying the show, too.

Rubbish has raised its ugly head and sneaked onto the agenda under AOCB of a number of committees, including the Health and Safety Committee, where some serious alarm was expressed in connection with staff health and the spread of illness.



Warning: this paper handkerchief may contain an Aberdeen variant of swine flu!

It must be admitted that a serious point may have been made here when one considers the scenario when the next pandemic trots down upon us and sneezing and overworked University of Aberdeen staff inadvertently fail to make that hourly bin run, thereby causing swarms of bacteria to accumulate in not yet DIY-discarded paper handkerchiefs. Rubbish has reportedly even wound its profane way into the setting of the University carol service and found mention during meditation in the form of a plea, if not a prayer, for the return of rubbish bins.

The Aberdeen University rubbish problem has featured on the pages of the *Times Higher*, although *Private Eye* might have been a more suitable publication. There is probably a degree of inevitability in the fact that Aberdeen University rubbish is also being “tweeted” on Twitter. With all this adverse publicity, the University will at least be able to breathe a sigh of relief that Julian Assange is too busy fighting off an orchestrated attack by dark forces to have time to leak any University Senior Management rubbish discussions.

The rubbish problem does, of course, have a serious side to it, given the way in which this decision appears to have been reached, for, surprisingly, no consultation took place beforehand with the recognised unions on campus—unions who do sterling work in saving the University large amounts of money by defusing conflicts and contributing input to University policy documents. It is difficult to resist the thought that a modicum of consultation with UCU and others beforehand might have led to some useful discussion and perhaps modification of this measure. UCU has always endeavoured to work, where possible and where appropriate, in a collaborative spirit with University Management.

One cannot, of course, discuss the topic of rubbish without being reminded of recent developments in the world of academe—and in the sphere of politics, from which, sadly, we are not divorced. This year's insult to university employees was the offer of a 0.1% salary increase, hence in scientific terms an additional two pickled onions on the top of the monthly fish-supper treat. Yet, even this bonus is of course not a bonus. Since inflation is currently running at 3.7%, this year's salary increase offer from university employers is in reality the accustomed real-terms salary cut. There is nothing new about this. The rest of the country may be preparing itself for salary cuts, but we are well used to it. The annual real-terms salary cut for University employees has become something of a tradition. Apart from a brief period of catch-up around 2005, the salaries of University staff have been steadily declining for years, essentially save for instances where the employers have been forced to put their hands in their pockets as a result of industrial action.

If the pattern of salary decline continues, in 17 years (and how quickly time passes) in real terms our salaries will be worth less than 50% of their current value. It would presumably be superfluous to point out that gas, electricity, Council Tax bills and indirect taxation are currently soaring and are likely to continue to rise. This is a useful point for reflection for hitherto non-UCU members who will certainly begin to feel the pinch should UCU members not take industrial action and, as a result, non-members' salaries not increase.

Nor is the employers' allergy to salary increases a surprise, since payroll is the major expense for university employers and there are so many other things in which university employers would much rather invest. At Aberdeen, for example, we can admire assorted statues on campus (is that an aardvark next to Taylor Block C?), new heating systems, and, shortly, new windows. Will it ever be possible to admire those nice new windows—and everything else—without reflecting upon the extent to which our annually diminishing salaries financed them? Probably not.

There exists a fashionable phrase that we "have to do more with less" due to the crisis. Sadly, this idea is not an innovation, since university employees have all been doing more with and *for* less for years already. Budgets were being cut and staff-student ratios increased long before the current financial crisis, so what the rest of the country is currently experiencing is nothing novel in the university world.

University employers seem happy to watch their employees' salaries shrink and are currently attacking employees' pensions. At Aberdeen the employers last year attempted unsuccessfully to deprive advisers of their honoraria in order to save money. To top all this they are eager to earn a bit more cash from their employees by charging them to park their cars on campus.

At the same time the University would like to present itself as an "investor in people". Does this mean that our employer is going to champion some salary rises or at least a salary which keeps up with inflation? Ehm... No. Instead we are to be offered discounts for membership of a sports club and other such trivia. One might argue that this is not a bonus, since the whole thing is financed ultimately by our annual salary cuts. Those are the crumbs, fine, but, with Brecht (who said it more poetically), where is the whole loaf?

Once one's attention is drawn to some phenomenon or other, in this case rubbish, the more one notices examples of it.



Teaching and learning amongst the classroom rubbish

Volunteering Opportunities

Department Reps

Health & Safety Reps

Personal Caseworkers

Focus Group Members

FULL TRAINING AND SUPPORT PROVIDED

Contact sue.bateman@abdn.ac.uk to find out more

General Meeting

Wednesday 2nd February

At

1pm

In KCG8

Michael MacNeil – National Head of Higher Education will talking about:

The national ballot on pay, job security and pensions.

Come along and have your questions answered

For economic reasons we are producing this newsletter in black and white print. Full colour version available at www.abdn.ac.uk/ucu

UCU
University and College Union

Fixed-Term Matters

Staff not employed on “permanent” contracts comprise about a quarter of the membership of UCU in Aberdeen. Here at AUCU we are aware of a few different types of contract - “fixed-term”, “open-ended” and “0 hours” primarily. If you are on one of these “other” types of contract you are still entitled to protection in law against unfair treatment. The AUCU website has a section with useful links to information <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/ucu/issues/links/>.

Teaching fellows, research fellows, tutors and postgraduate students employed as tutors or demonstrators are often employed on these types of contract. AUCU is keen to ensure that members in these groups are well represented on the union committee. Alan Fenwick (a.j.fenwick@abdn.ac.uk) was recently elected as the fixed term representative. Jean-Baptiste Combes (jbcombes@gmail.com) is the postgraduate representative and convenor of the focus group on Casualised Contracts (including hourly paid, fixed term & postgraduates). They held a meeting of the focus group on Wednesday 26th January.

Issues discussed included terms and conditions for postgraduate tutors and consideration of the terms of the University of Aberdeen ‘Open-ended’ contracts which have replaced fixed term contracts for some teaching and research posts.

Postgraduate Issues

Jointly with the Student Association, the focus group highlights the fact that students are likely to be appraised for their PhDs by staff who are in charge of their employment and pay as tutors. Students doing teaching are in a grey zone, still students and not completely staff, as the consequence, like other groups of staff they need support and coordinated action. Students are likely to be asked to perform a wide variety of jobs for the university. However, how management decide the grade is quite unclear and does not seem to provide the right pay for the tasks being undertaken. The focus group will be progressing this issue when they next meet on 23rd February.

Fixed-term Issues

The new open-ended contract arrangements have led to some confusion and it will take time to work through the changes in culture that go along with them. Career planning for contract staff, workable processes for redundancy avoidance and the engagement of management at all levels will also produce benefits. While mobility is often a feature of early research careers, high attrition rates and “discard after use” management practices are inconsistent with the

civilised academic values and these values are at least as important to research productivity as the specific skills and capacities of our researchers.

AUCU is planning to run two separate meetings (one in Old Aberdeen and the other at Foresterhill) to explain the new contracts and associated issues. It is hoped that a member of the HR department will also be present at these meetings. Further information will be sent to members in due course.

We become aware of issues as members raise them and you are invited to contact one of us or the Union Administrator Sue Bateman sue.bateman@abdn.ac.uk to bring matters which concern you to our attention.

(Alan Fenwick is a KTP associate in the School of Engineering attached to Zenith Oilfield Technology in Inverurie. This is his second contract with the University which he joined in October 2008.

Jean-Baptiste Combes is a PhD student in the Health Economics Research Unit in Foresterhill due to finish in November 2011).

AUCU also has Focus Groups on the following topics:

- Academic Related
- Environment
- Equality & Diversity
- Health & Safety
- Pensions
- Promotions, Pay and Progression
- Publicity

To find out how you can contribute to any of these groups please contact Sue Bateman – sue.bateman@abdn.ac.uk

If you would like to write an article or reader’s letter for the next AGORA please send your suggestions to Sue and she will raise them with the Publicity Focus Group.

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