



AGORA

Winter term 2007–8

Presidential Despatches – Terry Brotherstone

(AAUT and AUCU committee since the late 1980s)

It may not be in the forefront of your consciousness of recent history, but earlier this year you elected me President of UCU Scotland: that's what I've been since June and, barring the unforeseeable, will continue to be... until May 2009. But there's just a chance that some of you haven't much of a clue what UCU Scotland is and what it does. I'd like to try to increase awareness of its importance and participation in its affairs.

UCU is a new UK-wide union, the largest in the world representing academic and academic-related staff in tertiary education. It includes everyone previously represented by AUT, and by NATFHE (the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education) that did not recruit in Scotland. We're all part of it and I hope that, over the next few years, we'll see the benefits of its increased influence and, when necessary, muscle-power.

But the change has not removed the need for a distinctively Scottish presence. On the contrary – and this was generally recognised in setting up the new union – that need is not only a matter of history and identity, important though those are. It is also very practical. The practice of how HE is delivered in Scotland has changed considerably since Devolution. And if there *is* now to be a discussion about national independence – whatever that might mean – it is essential that Scottish universities play a big part in it.

By 'Scottish universities', let's be clear, I don't simply mean – as the media too often does – the Vice-Chancellors or their coordinating body, Universities Scotland. I mean, primarily, not US, but *us*. It is the academic and academic-related staff UCU Scotland represents, and our colleagues in the other campus trade unions, who are the *sine qua non* of the Scottish universities. UCU Scotland must try to create conditions for more of our members actively to promote this far from universally acknowledged truth.

UCU Scotland's predecessor, AUTS, began life more or less as a coordinating body, primarily a meeting-place for local association secretaries and union officials. It is now in part directly elected. But the coordinating function remains and is, perhaps all the more, important. University managements are driven by their perception of global competition and relatively diminishing public funds to demand more and more of staff; to limit (sometimes without even realising it) academic freedom in the broad sense in which it used to be (and ought to be) understood; and to undermine the basis of collegiality by concentrating resources on research stars, thus creating ever wider differentials.

In most universities also it's increasingly the case that colleagues feel employed *by* the institution (more or less benevolently) where once they thought of themselves as actually *being* the institution, or at least an essential part of its governance.

Ask any local UCU lay official. More and more they are faced with new policies and initiatives with implications for conditions of service – sometimes apparently innocent or even beneficial, or inevitable because of legal changes – that require detailed scrutiny if they are not to result in the diminution of your right to do the job in the way you think it ought to be done. Coordination of information amongst UCU branches in Scotland is vital if we're to fight for best possible practice everywhere rather than be driven around a downward spiral of managerial priorities.

But there is, nowadays, much more to UCU Scotland. Over the past month I've been learning more about the wide range of work our professional officials in Edinburgh do, and which elected lay officers, led by the President, participate in and oversee on your behalf.

Much of it is to do with personal cases, a core function of our union. Local caseworkers (of which I'm sure Aberdeen has too few) rely more and more on central advice as cases become more frequent, more complex and more entwined with new legal and other regulatory requirements on employers. In this work, the separate identity of UCU Scotland is important (though at the moment our hardworking office staff also service NE England – something we hope to change). It gives us almost instant access to officials briefed on the Scottish situation and with experience of a distinctive HE culture.

But there's much more to it than that. My own involvement in consultations and lobbying recently has included meetings with the government minister (or Cabinet Secretary) Fiona Hyslop, Scottish Funding Council officials, Opposition MSPs, officers of the National Union of Students Scotland, officials of Universities Scotland and, not least in importance, our own General Secretary, Sally Hunt. UCU Scotland has a vital role in mediating relations with the national UK union, and, as UCU Scotland President I'm a full member of UCU's UK National Executive and the Higher Education Committee.

Clearly the Scottish funding settlement announced on 14 November was not good. It is more than disturbing that the new government does not see university funding and their commitment to eliminate student debt as priorities in what they say is an unexpectedly tight financial situation. (There's an argument, of course, about whether it *is* a worse situation than should have been anticipated.) And SNP ministers also have to bear in mind their lack of a parliamentary majority.

But if the SNP's commitment to a bright Scottish future in the world of global capital is not to be mere rhetoric, they will have to confront seriously the funding of universities, and we have a key role in arguing this. In my view we should do so from the standpoint of what universities mean, not just for 'Scotland plc', but for Scottish *people* and for our standing amongst current and potential international students – in the spirit, that is to say, of *universitas*.

We have called for a review – or full-scale public debate – about the role Scotland's universities have played historically, about what their contribution to society is now, and about how they should develop in future. If public policy is to match the all-party rhetoric that constantly announces what an asset its universities are to Scotland's economy and international image, there may have to be a fundamental rethink about how publicly to raise the funding necessary to run them. We would be glad to play a major part in such a review.

It would not be confined to the question – but would certainly include it – of how to ensure that *all* university staff are properly paid and have secure contracts. Which brings us back to the union's core functions, and to the new union. UCU Scotland, in addition to being involved

with all the inevitable teething troubles of the new UK organisation, has its own particular challenges – and opportunities.

We are dealing not just with a different government and funding council, but also with a history, an educational culture, and a balance of establishment political consensus that are different from south of the border. Yet, in acknowledging all that, we must interpret its practical relevance from an internationalist, not a parochial, point of view. If we can make gains in Scotland, we can show an example to the rest of the UK, and we can enhance Scottish universities international reputation in more ways than are recorded by competitive league tables.

To make the most of the potential of the new union in Scotland we must also pay attention to inter-union relations. Things are different here because the teachers' union EIS covers the territory that used to be NATFHE's patch in England and Wales. We have to look at what this means for union solidarity in HE particularly, and across HE and FE (now covered by a single funding council) more generally. I think we are moving into a world in which rational arguments, about the way in which academics constitute what AUT's historian Harold Perkin – reflecting on our role in preparing future generations of decision-makers – called the 'key profession', are becoming less significant than trade-union solidarity across the sector as a whole.

Ever since we set it up years ago, we've wanted *Agora* to become a forum for debate. I hope I may have said *something* about which colleagues might want to express a view.

Hourly paid staff – Alex Arthur

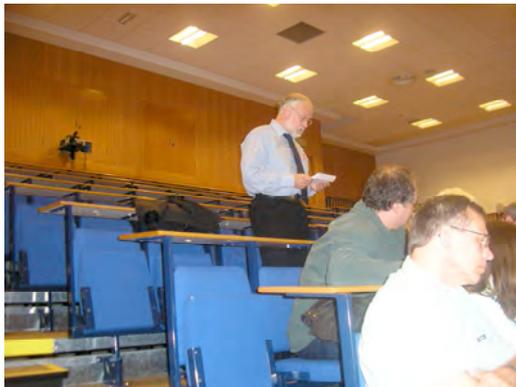
Some hourly paid staff and school administrators may be experiencing confusion over the new contract and pay arrangements. AUCU is aware of these difficulties. Early in 2007, we reached an agreement with the University management that incorporated certain broad principles:

1. that hourly paid academic staff would be matched to the academic role profiles, and would be paid on scales derived from these;
2. that pay would be based on a reasonable estimate of actual hours worked, and not on contact hours; and
3. that where a member of staff was employed for a number of hours that represented more than 10% of a full time load, they would be put on a proportional fractional contract, rather than being paid on an hourly basis.

While there was room for flexibility in the way these principles (and other aspects of the agreement) were to be put into practice, they clearly rule out contracts based on the old 'contact hours' system. The agreement that was reached included arrangements for a review of the process after 12 months of operation, and the collection of information on how well it has been working. In the interim, AUCU will be happy to engage constructively with the University to resolve any difficulties that might be arising in these early stages of implementation.

Global Forum 2007 – Andrew Mackillop

On 18 April 2007 AUCU hosted its first Global Forum. The Forum was initiated by AUCU's Equal Opportunities Committee, and is designed to facilitate debate and discussion within the University community on a wide range of diversity and equality issues. Its specific aim is to bring together UCU members, the Student Union and its associations, the other campus unions, as well as interested members of the University management to exchange views and to reflect on areas of common concern. The theme of the first forum was 'An Agenda for Equal Opportunities in Scotland'. The event kicked off with five minute presentations by representatives of the following Scottish political parties: the Conservatives; the Greens; Labour; the Liberal Democrats; the Scottish National Party; and the Scottish Socialists. In the hour-long question and answer session that followed students and UCU colleagues pressed the representatives on their differing approaches to Equal Opportunities. Discussion covered party political funding, student fees as an equalities issue, and the need for holistic Higher Education policies that encompass social background, gender, sexual orientation, religion and race. Representatives from the student union, university management and UCU colleagues ensured that the Forum was a lively and stimulating event. Another Global Forum debate will be held during the Fairtrade fortnight, 2008.



Hugh Galbraith thanks the speakers



Andrew Mackillop convening the Forum

University of Aberdeen Annual Ladies' Luncheon – Rachel Shanks

The 2007 University of Aberdeen Annual Ladies' Luncheon had well over 200 women attending. This event began in 1995 as part of the 500 year celebrations and has continued ever since. There was a drink first then sit-down meal at the Marcliffe Hotel in Pitfodels. There were stalls to look at between the end of lunch and the speaker. The guest speaker was Mary Contini who is director of the famous deli Valvona and Crolla in Edinburgh. She spoke very well about an Italian family coming to Scotland. The lunch is to raise funds for the Student Charities and is attended by current female members of staff or the partners of current staff and alumni of the university. There was a competition to find the oldest graduate present when one table announced they had a graduate of almost 90 and then another table had a graduate of 92. Apart from that competitive frisson the atmosphere was very friendly and it was interesting to see the mix of past and present university women. It is hoped that next year that we can organise a UCU women's table.

Curriculum reform – Elizabeth Macknight

People rarely say good things about committees. On the one hand their formation signals something is afoot; on the other it signals nothing will be done very quickly. So what are we, as AUCU members, to make of the setting up of the Curriculum Reform Commission, six Groups, and Magi that are gathering and considering information about the Aberdeen curriculum?

At this early stage – the Commission has met once at the time of writing and the Steering Group twice – I want to remind members of a motion adopted at the AUCU General Meeting on 16 May 2007 that called for:

1. a binding commitment to sustained university-wide consultation about the proposed curriculum reform; and
2. recognition of the need for university management, Aberdeen UCU, and other relevant trade unions to negotiate staff workloads.

The reason I proposed the motion at the meeting was to highlight two crucial points relating to procedure in curriculum reform. Those points emerged from my observation of the consultation carried out at the University of Melbourne during 2005–6, which led to the development of the ‘Melbourne Model’ that is one example of curriculum reform at an Australian university.¹

Let me expand initially on the second point of the motion: negotiation of staff workloads. This is a topic that I believe needs to be at the forefront of management and trade union consideration at Aberdeen where academic, academic-related, and support staff are only just emerging from a stressful period building up to the University’s RAE 2008 submission.

At Melbourne, restructuring in preparation for the delivery of six new undergraduate degrees coincided with a major review of the Arts Faculty and preparation for the Australia-wide introduction of the Research Quality Framework (RQF) that performs a similar function to the RAE. There have been job cuts and the toll on staff at all levels in terms of work-related stress continues to be severe.

At Aberdeen, Professor Bryan MacGregor announced the arrangements made to relieve him of some duties as Head of CASS in anticipation of the workload he will incur managing the Curriculum Reform Project. How will other members of academic and academic-related staff deal with the additional pressure on their time stemming from the impetus to attend briefing meetings, to read papers on curriculum reform at other universities, to post submissions to the blog and online discussion forum, and to prepare presentations to the Steering Group on top of the work they already do?

We are just at the beginning of a projected three-year period dedicated to the Curriculum Reform Project so I would urge members to monitor the situation, to identify who you might speak to about workload issues (for example, there are two AUCU officers on the Commission, myself and Howard Chandler), and to remember that the College and University Support Network (CUSN) provides a range of support services for you.

Let me now return to the first point of the motion: the commitment to sustained university-wide consultation. My sense on this is ‘so far, so good’; there does seem to be a range of mechanisms in place to ensure sustained consultation with interest groups across the staff and student populations.

The reason I declared support, at the first meeting of the Commission, for a proposal to ensure messages could be posted anonymously to the blog and discussion forum, was a sentiment I was picking up on in conversations with colleagues. The gist of that sentiment is that people believe any publicly expressed criticism of the Curriculum Reform Project might be detrimental to the critic's prospects for promotion or completion of probation, that it would put the critic 'out of favour' with senior management.

My own view is this. Universities are full of opinionated people. That's what makes them such interesting places in which to work; you might disagree. What I think matters is the courage to express an opinion publicly and, perhaps even more importantly, the ability to listen and to respond appropriately to other people's opinions. That said, not everyone feels equally comfortable expressing their opinion in front of others, as I know from my experience, as a student and then as a teacher, of tutorial discussions.

If you do wish to comment on some aspect of the Curriculum Reform Project, but cannot bring yourself to be identified as the author of that comment, then please avail yourself of the option for anonymous postings by using an invented username and a non-university email address for the blog and discussion forum.

Criticism is most effective when coupled with a suggestion for an alternative approach and for this we all need to keep our thinking caps on. A quote from John Stuart Mill should provide food for thought: 'If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one opinion than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.'

¹. For further detail see my paper 'The Melbourne Model for Aberdeen?' <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/cass/bulletin/melbournemodel.shtml>

CUSN – Support for you

The College and University Support Network (CUSN) offers support services to all staff in further and higher education and their families, including:

- **Counselling:** confidential, solution-focused counselling on personal and workplace issues
- **One-to-one coaching:** personalised practical and emotional support via a secure email system
- **Information, advice and support material:** news, guides and fact sheets on relevant topics such as well-being, work-life balance, workload problems, stress management, coping with bereavement, and dealing with difficult people
- **Financial assistance:** a needs-based grants and loans programme
- **Money management advice:** individually tailored strategies to address financial difficulties, restructure debt and secure benefits.
- **Signposting to relevant organisations:** the information you need to take the next steps to a better future.

All these services can be accessed online or through a 24/7 telephone support line, on **Freephone 08000 329952**.

AUCU Garden Party – Elizabeth Macknight

To mark the end of a busy year for AUCU, and to farewell outgoing president Micheál O’Siochrú, a Garden Party open to all members was held at the Humanities Manse on 19 June 2007. This event was followed by a commemorative committee dinner where longstanding officers and relative newcomers reflected upon the highs and lows of union activism and the challenges that lie ahead in working as your elected representatives.



conviviality at the Humanities Manse; outgoing president Micheál O’Siochrú opens his farewell gifts, a bonsai potato ... and a bubble sword; Andrew Mackillop and John Morrison; secretary Susan Melvin and former president Louise Bourdua

Committee dinner



Louise Bourdua; Steve Lawrie and Micheál O'Siochrú; the gents' table; the ladies' table

Local branch contact information

Aberdeen University & College Union
 Branch Office Administrator: Mrs Susan Melvin
 C18 Taylor Building
 King's Campus
 University of Aberdeen
 AB24 3UB
 Telephone: 01224 272377
 Email: susan.melvin@abdn.ac.uk
 Office Email: aberdeen-ucu@abdn.ac.uk
 Office hours: Monday Closed
 Tuesday 8.45-12.45
 Wednesday 8.45-12.45
 Thursday 8.45-12.45
 Friday Closed

The office is only staffed during school term time. To contact Aberdeen UCU during vacation times, use the office email contact shown above.

Got something to say?

This issue of *Agora* has been prepared using a new trial format and for the first time will be made available online (www.abdn.ac.uk/ucu). We welcome any feedback you may have, and contributions for the next issue, which should be submitted to the local branch office. *Agora* is intended to serve as both a newsletter and a forum for debate. The views expressed in its pages are not necessarily shared by officers of the local branch committee.

2007 – 2009/10 Branch Committee

<i>Officers:</i>			01224 –27xxxx	name@abdn.ac.uk
President	Alex Arthur	Accountancy	2211	a.arthur
Vice President	David Anderson	Anthropology	2770	david.anderson
Secretary	Mike McConnell	DIT	2602	m.mccconnell
Asst. Secretary	Andrew Mackillop	History	2460	a.mackillop
Treasurer	Howard Chandler	Engineering	2496	h.w.chandler
Membership Secretary	Mike Craig	Reprographics	2594	m.craig
Publicity Secretary	Steven Lawrie	German	3675	s.lawrie
Equality Officer	Elizabeth Macknight	History	3885	e.macknight
Personal Cases	Isobel Ford	Medicine & Therapeutics	553013	i.ford
Ex Officio UCUS	Terry Brotherstone	History	2466	t.brotherstone

Special Interest & Ordinary Members:

Admin	A. Godfrey-Brown	External Affairs	3231	a.g.brown
Library	Martin Sommer	QML	2572	m.sommer
Computing	Chris Patterson	DIT	3362	chris.patterson
Women	Rachel Shanks	Lifelong Learning	3670	r.shanks
Fixed Term	Isobel Ford	Medicine & Therapeutics	553013	i.ford
Post Graduate	Penny McCall Howard	Anthropology		p.m.howard
Ordinary 1 (to 31/8/08)	Adam Price	Plant & Soil Science	2690	a.price
Ordinary 2 (to 31/8/08)	Owen Logan	History	2465	o.logan
Ordinary 3 (to 31/8/09)	Samer Bagaeen	Geography	4128	samer.bagaeen
Ordinary 4 (to 31/8/09)	Ruth Payne	Retired	571289	ruth.payne
Ordinary 5 (to 31/8/10)	Jan Skakle	Physics/Chemistry	3798	j.skakle
Ordinary 6 (to 31/8/10)	Ben Marsden	History	2637	b.marsden

Representatives to UCU Congress:

President or Secretary plus one other to be decided

Representatives to UCUS Congress:

Secretary	Mike McConnell	DIT	2602	m.mccconnell
Rep 1	Alex Arthur	Accountancy	2211	a.arthur
Rep 2	Elizabeth Macknight	History	3885	e.macknight
Rep 3	Andrew Mackillop	History	2460	a.mackillop

Other Representatives:

Health & Safety	Tom Redpath	Radiology	552263	t.redpath
Web Site	Martyn Gorman	Zoology	2850	m.gorman
Hon. Auditor	Allan Stewart	Retired	824656	allanstewart@dsl.pipex.com
Returning Officer	Cheryl Croydon	Registry	2081	c.d.croydon