

The AGORA *bulletin*

AGORA – the Newsletter of the Aberdeen University and College Union

The Year Ahead...

Another academic year is upon us and brings with it many of the usual issues and concerns which shape university life in general - be it increasing student numbers, workload, stress, pay and job security. While all these topics have their own particular characteristics here in Aberdeen, there is no doubt that the financial climate for the universities will become more uncertain as the profound instabilities generated by the private sector economy are displaced into the public sector. The UK administration coming to power after the general election next year will, regardless of its political hue, take a long hard look at the public purse and begin making cuts in any number of different areas. This state of affairs will form the unavoidable backdrop to UCU's national-level activities in the coming year and will in turn shape the aims and priorities of AUCU.

There is little doubt that the future direction, shape and function of Higher Education in the UK and in Scotland is at a profound cross-roads. The slightly enhanced financial provision for Higher Education in this year's Scottish budget cannot disguise the wider changes that will afflict public spending from 2011 onwards. A wide-ranging debate is urgently required on what exactly Higher Education in this country is all about: is it to be subject to ever more corporatisation and marketisation, becoming in the process an ancillary service of the national and global economy? Through their teaching and research activities universities have always linked into the private sector. This is exactly as it should be: but universities need to think carefully about tying their activities too closely and uncritically to the dictates of the modern economy. The Scottish Funding Council's consultation on proposals to radically reshape the allocation of teaching funds is a clear example of how ever changing yardsticks that reduce academic subjects to a given budgetary quantity and utility can leave Higher Education institutions extremely vulnerable. In the context of increasing uncertainty over the amount and methods by which the universities will be financed, the role played by the Higher Education sector unions becomes more, not less, important. As representatives of the academic and academic-related staff who deliver the research and the teaching, it is vital that UCU and its members help to shape debates over the future funding and function of the universities.

Any such discussion has to be predicated on a close working relationship with the other

unions. There is evidence that such co-operation is beginning to occur. Although anxious at both the national and local level to ensure that bargaining mechanisms remain sensitive to the distinctive needs of its academic and academic related members, UCU is forging new links with the other sector unions (the EIS, GMB, Unison and Unite). On the question of pay, for example, all the unions are in agreement. The current offer of 0.5% is the lowest in the entire public sector and represents a pay cut in real terms. No one, least of all UCU members, likes the idea of taking any form of strike action for pay. In the present climate many colleagues simply feel that there are other priorities. This came across clearly in the recent consultation undertaken here in Aberdeen by means of an e-survey and General Meeting. Anxieties over funding, and especially over job conditions and stress, have inevitably shaped attitudes towards what constitutes an acceptable pay offer. On the matter of job security members indicated that they would be prepared to resist any attempt by employers to undermine jobs and initiate any compulsory redundancies.

The recent local consultation of members was part of a much wider national survey of UCU's membership, the results of which are now known. The membership was firmly set against any strike action for pay and extremely reluctant to consider action short of strike in pursuit of a pay claim. While the national negotiators remain committed to achieving what they can for members, the emphasis has

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The next edition of AGORA will be published in December 2009. If you wish to contribute an article or express your opinion please contact the editor via the Branch Administrative Officer, Susan Melvin, at: susan.melvin@abdn.ac.uk.

Your views are not just welcome they are essential.



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changed towards minimising cuts and jobs losses across the sector. The realism and restraint of UCU members underscores the commitment of staff and colleagues to the wider welfare of the HE sector as a whole. The ball is now firmly in the employer's court. Having demanded an effective pay freeze to save jobs, the universities now need to implement strategies to protect people and posts rather than policies which exacerbate the growing pay differentials and target driven culture that now characterises the HE sector. People lie at the heart of universities, and in tough financial times this fact should form the touchstone of everyone's priorities.

It should be stressed that there are reasons to be positive: one of the genuinely exciting prospects of this year is the potential, albeit in adversity, for all the sector unions to work together to protect jobs and conditions. Here in Aberdeen AUCU is working closely with colleagues in the support unions to identify those areas where a common approach is necessary – be it on car parking, the development of an avoidance of redundancy policy and, above all, to ensure that the University of Aberdeen does not resort to compulsory redundancies. On 13th October the University released a communication to all administrative, technical, secretarial and support staff. In highlighting the need for recession planning and adjustment to future financial realities, it gave an early indication of the University's priorities and plans. AUCU obviously welcomes any statement that reiterates the University's commitment to its academic mission of research and teaching. But academic excellence will not be sustained in a university that does not see its employees in a holistic manner, from support staff colleagues, through the administrative and secretarial sectors, to the hourly paid PG tutor, lecturer, professors and managers. Constant restructuring – that great euphemism for job losses by stealth – is not the way forward. A people-centred approach that recognises the innately interdependent nature of what we all do must lie at the heart of all our responses to the looming financial climate.

Nor is it just colleagues in the other sector unions that UCU and AUCU need to talk to.

One of the most depressing events of recent months is re-emergence of the threat that undergraduate fees will be re-introduced into Scottish universities for all categories of students. It is difficult to come to any other conclusion than that the public's expectations are being deliberately lowered in order to make it seem inevitable that fees are the only solution to a looming funding crisis in Scottish higher education. The silence emanating from Universities Scotland on the issue is deafening, and speaks volume about how the university leadership is refusing to help in the construction of a cogent case to government that fees are wrong in principle and counterproductive in practice. AUCU has already begun working with the Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA) to initiate a debate on the negative academic, pedagogic and material consequences arising from asking students to pay for their own education. The General Meeting on 29 September supported AUSA's efforts to highlight this vital issue: AUCU members can play their part by making clear their opposition to fees. Please support the students on this issue.

If the potential for funding cuts and inter-union cooperation form two main themes that will dominate the branch's activities this year, another is the need for greater consultation, both between the branch committee and members and between AUCU and the University. A whole range of ongoing issues means that the local committee will be consulting the members regularly for their thoughts and preferences. The consequences arising from the University's implementation of the Immigration Points System is a case in point. Members have made it clear to the Committee that the required monitoring of non-EU colleagues could have been handled by the University with greater sensitivity and transparency. Everyone accepts that the University is legally obliged to undertake such monitoring; but it needs to do so in ways that are clearly understood and consistently applied.

Curriculum reform, meanwhile, is now in the process of implementation. It is vital that the additional workload and administration required to float the new programmes does not become excessive. Questions also remain over how timetabling and staffing resources will evolve to meet the challenges of the new set-up. Last year senior members of the Curriculum Reform project held consultation meetings with the local committee, a practice which AUCU will seek to continue.

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With so many of the University's activities co-dependent, the process of Curriculum Reform has forced the re-consideration of established practices in other areas. Undergraduate student advising is an obvious example. In February this year Senate considered an important report by the Working Party on Academic and Pastoral Support for Students which highlighted a whole raft of policies designed to enhance the learning experience at Aberdeen. While AUCU welcomed many of the report's recommendations, the suggestion that the University make advising a contractual obligation and remove the associated honoraria is an entirely matter. The University will never develop an effective, efficient and working system of undergraduate advising by removing income from those who actually undertake the task. Indeed, seen in conjunction with the 0.5% national pay offer, any removal of financial recognition for advising amounts to a second pay cut. Negotiations will commence this academic year on what all agree is a vital if thorny issue; however, the local branch can only be effective if it is given a clear steer from members on what they believe constitutes a satisfactory outcome. The survey of AUCU members on the advising question indicated a clear preference for the retention of honoraria and the voluntary principle. This will form the basis of the branch's position in all negotiations. The membership will be asked at further consultative meetings on how they wish the matter to be taken forward.

The prospect of a chill financial wind blowing through the university sector will inevitably force UCU and AUCU to adjust their activities. More so than ever, the branch will have to try and protect the most vulnerable sections of the workforce. Temporary service colleagues and those on fixed term contracts deliver large swathes of the University's research and teaching, and their central importance must be reflected in the branch's recruitment strategies and in its consultative practices. More generally, the Committee will seek to connect with all colleagues who have yet to be persuaded of the utility and value of UCU membership. In order for us to undertake this task we need the help of our current members through involvement in General Meetings or by feeding suggestions and advice to the Committee. The challenges and issues highlighted here are the concern of each and every individual in the University of Aberdeen: the AUCU Committee, along with the branch membership, has an important role to play in addressing these questions. For AUCU to be effective we clearly need to co-operate more with our support staff and student union colleagues and ensure continual consultation within the branch itself. In this sense we need not approach the year thinking only of restructuring, funding adjustments or real term pay cuts: there is much we can do as individual union members, collectively as a branch, and as part of UCU to shape developments in the University and across the sector as a whole. **On that note, the Committee wishes you all the best for the coming year.**

Andrew Mackillop
President, AUCU Committee

General Meeting on Wednesday 4th November at 1pm in New King's 10. All members are invited to attend.

Agenda will include items on:

- **Pay and job security** - report back on the UCU national consultation with members and ongoing negotiations with employers.
- **Outsourcing of university services** - what impact will this have on you?
- **Promotions** - the next promotions round is coming. Advice and support available for members.
- **Branch restructuring** and formation of focus groups.

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UCU
University and College Union