

Referenda on the Union's stance regarding current UCU Industrial Action

Date of Referenda: 19 – 21 January 2022

The purpose of this referenda is for students at Royal Holloway to collectively decide the Students' Union's position on the current UCU industrial action. Article 7 (and Byelaw B) of the Students' Union Constitution states a referendum (or preferenda) can be called by a majority of the Officer Group – official notification for this preferenda was sent out on 10 December 2021.

A. Context

1. The University and College Union (UCU) are one of the largest trade unions in the UK higher education sector, they lobby for the rights of trade union members. The UCU went out for ballot on industrial action pertaining to two separate legal disputes, one on pensions and one on pay and working conditions.
2. Across the UK, 33 higher education institutions are striking on both disputes. Whilst four institutions are striking on just the pensions dispute, and 21 are striking on just the pay and working conditions dispute. Overall, 76% of UCU members across the UK who voted backed strike action in the ballot over changes to pensions, 70% of UCU members across the UK who voted backed strike action on pay and working conditions.
3. The overall turnout in the ballot around pensions was 53% and on pay and working conditions it was 51%. The UCU disaggregated the ballots so branches who secured a 50% turnout can take action. The Royal Holloway branch of the UCU succeeded the 50% turnout threshold in both ballots providing mandate for strike action up to May 2022. With the first industrial action taking the form of a strike from 1 December to 3 December 2021.
4. Action short of a strike (ASOS) is defined by the UCU to potentially include: working to contract (only the hours defined by their contract, e.g. 9-5pm), not covering for absent colleagues, not rescheduling lectures or classes cancelled due to strike action, not undertaking any voluntary activities, or a marking and assessment boycott.

B. Pensions

5. The Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) is the largest pension scheme for academics and professional staff of British universities. There are 400,000 members across 350 institutions. The USS reported a technical deficit of £17.5 billion in July 2017 – which means more money is needed to ensure university staff with USS pensions can receive benefits in retirement.
6. There are USS members that are not UCU members, and there are UCU members that are not USS members. At Royal Holloway around 400 staff are members of UCU.
7. In 2011, the final salary pension scheme available to staff was closed (any new members to the scheme no longer had a 'final salary' defined benefit pension). Instead a 'career average' salary was used to define the benefit to members of the pension scheme.
8. In 2017, the USS proposed closure of their defined benefit scheme entirely due to the growing deficit – this resulted in 14 days of strike action by the UCU in 2018. As a result of this, the defined benefit scheme element was not closed.

9. An independent Joint Expert Panel was established to review the valuation of the deficit, the panel disputed the original valuation and felt that the deficit had been overstated. In effect, they felt that less extra money was needed to be paid in to make the scheme sustainable. USS made some increases to employee contributions and reductions to retirement benefits to manage the fund deficit, and agreed for a second revaluation to take place in 2020.
10. The 2020 valuation showed that the technical deficit stood at c. £18 billion if no further changes to the scheme were implemented now. That in effect means there is an expected £18 billion gap between the funds the scheme needs to pay pension benefits to its members, and the funds the scheme has access to.
11. A Joint Negotiating Panel (made up of UCU representatives, USS representatives and an independent chair) considered the 2020 valuation of the deficit, and implemented some changes to the scheme: an increase in employee pension contributions from 9.6% to 9.8% (from October 2021), an increase in employer pension contributions from 21.1% to 21.4% (from October 2021), and finally, some changes to the way the defined benefit element of the pension is accumulated (from April 2022).
12. The UCU believe that any additional funds required to make the scheme sustainable should be borne by employers, with no change to employee contributions or the benefits they can accumulate.
13. At Royal Holloway, the turnout of UCU members voting in the ballot over the pension dispute was 52.6%, reaching the 50% threshold required by the Trade Union Act 2016 to pursue action based on the outcome.
14. For the question 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of strike action?', 76.9% of respondents at Royal Holloway said Yes and 23.1% said No.
15. The UCU are calling for the University to cover the deficit, through increased employer contributions, with no detriment to UCU members and no changes to their pension benefits.

C. Four fights (pay and working conditions)

16. The UCU Four Fights refer to four areas of concern put forward by UCU for employers to consider in protection of pay and working conditions. The specific areas of concern are gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps, contract casualisation, workload and pay.
17. UCU would like Universities to work on a national level to tackle gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps across the sector. At Royal Holloway, the University are keen to work on this at a local level as they feel that a targeted approach will be more effective.
18. Just under half of universities use zero hour contracts in some form for teaching staff, while this is a very flexible employment contract with some benefits for staff it also means staff lack security in knowing their future expected earnings. Just over half of research staff in higher education are on fixed term contracts, meaning continued employment depends on a number of things like securing more funding or finding a new research project.
19. UCU completed a workload study in 2016 and found that staff in higher education work on average 50.9 hours per week, while they are contracted to work 35 hours per week. UCU would like Universities to actively reduce the workload of academic staff.

20. In general terms, 'real wages' go down for everyone when inflation is higher – for example if you get an annual pay rise of 2% but inflation is at 3%, it is a 'real wages' pay cut of 1% despite the extra pay. This is driven by economic trends and inflation. UCU believe that the pay of academic staff has dropped by around 17% in real terms since 2009.
21. UCU propose that universities apply a blanket £2500 increase to wages for all staff to address this concern. Universities are reluctant due to the inequity this creates, and have instead implemented percentage based pay increases.
22. At Royal Holloway, the turnout of UCU members voting in the ballot was 54%, reaching the 50% threshold required by the Trade Union Act 2016 to pursue action based on the outcome.
23. For the question 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of strike action?', 71.3% of respondents at Royal Holloway said Yes and 28.7% said No.

D. Contemporary resolution

This vote will form a contemporary resolution that that will relate to this specific issue for the time it is live. The Union's position will be determined by students through a cross campus preferenda ballot.

As the two disputes balloted by the UCU are combined into the same period of industrial action, these three positions refer to both the pensions dispute and the dispute on pay and working conditions. Whilst we understand that students may have different opinions regarding the two different ballots, UCU have received a mandate via the members ballot to undertake industrial action on both causes so they will be both be covered by the one position.

i. Timing

The UCU have received a mandate via the members' ballot to undertake industrial action on both causes through to May 2022 and as such we ask our members to vote regarding all action within this period. This means the resolution will run until May 2022 at which point it can be renewed or a new vote can be called on any further UCU industrial actions.

ii. Question

"What stance should Royal Holloway Students' Union adopt towards the current UCU industrial action?"

- a. To support the UCU's industrial action and its stance in its entirety, up to and including any further strike action.
- b. To support the UCU's stance regarding 'action short of strike', but reject the decision for wholesale strikes.
- c. To reject industrial action in its entirety

iii. Outcome

The preferenda will be counted using the Alternative Vote system and the option that receives the majority required will form the Union's view on this matter for the time specified.