

## **Referendum on the Proposed UCU Industrial Action**

The purpose of this preferendum is for students at Royal Holloway to collectively decide the Students' Union's position on the proposed UCU industrial action. Article 7 (and Byelaw B) of the Students' Union Constitution states a referendum (or preferendum) can be called by a majority of the Officer Group.

### **A. The Union Notes**

This first section sets out some of the important context and background information. This issue is complex and students need to understand the full context. Because of the complexity, a preferendum will be held to reflect the different views in the student population at Royal Holloway.

#### **i. Context**

1. Royal Holloway Students' Union (RHSU) is a registered independent charity, and is governed by a constitution approved by students. This constitution clearly gives student members the right and responsibility to make collective decisions over matters pertaining to their Union.
2. The current financial context of the UK Higher Education sector is one of uncertainty, with some higher education institutes facing difficult financial situations. This has the potential to put students, university staff and university activity at risk if this uncertainty is not managed.
3. 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.
4. Across the UK, 43 higher education institutions are striking on both disputes. Whilst 14 institutions are striking on just the pay and conditions, and 3 are striking on just the dispute around pensions. Overall, 79% of UCU members across the UK who voted backed strike action in the ballot over changes to pensions, 74% of UCU members across the UK who voted backed strike action on pay and working conditions.
5. The overall turnout in the ballot around pensions was 53% and on pay and working conditions it was 49%. The UCU disaggregated the ballots so branches who secured a 50% turnout can take action. The Royal Holloway branched of the UCU succeeded the 50% turnout threshold in both ballots and has therefore called for strike action to occur from the 25<sup>th</sup> November to the 4<sup>th</sup> December.
6. In both disputes the UCU put out two ballot questions in September 2019 for vote by UCU members, reflecting the complexity of this issue: 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of strike action?' and 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of action short of strike action up to and including a marking and assessment boycott?'.
7. 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.

#### **ii. Pensions**

8. 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.
  9. 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.
  10. 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.
  11. 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.
  12. 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. 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.
  13. Employee contributions are set to rise in 2021 (up from 6.5% in 2011, 8.8% in April 2019, 10.4% in October 2019, to a proposed 11.4% in April 2020) subject to the 2020 revaluation results. Employer contributions are set to rise alongside this (up from 19.5% in April 2019, 22.5% in October 2019, to a proposed 24.2% in April 2020).
  14. Unlike the 2018 strikes, which were about ensuring the benefits of the pension scheme were safeguarded for staff, this round of strikes is concerning who contributes the funding to cover the increased costs necessary to maintain the pension scheme. The UCU believe this cost should be covered by the employer (the University), not the employees (the members of academic staff).
  15. At Royal Holloway, the turnout of UCU members voting in the ballot over the pension dispute was 50.1%, reaching the 50% threshold required by the Trade Union Act 2016 to pursue action based on the outcome.
  16. For the question ‘Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of strike action?’, 83.59% respondents at Royal Holloway said Yes and 16.41% said No, one ballot was blank. For the question ‘Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of action short of strike action up to and including a marking and assessment boycott?’, 86.38% of respondents at Royal Holloway said Yes and 13.62% said No.
  17. The UCU are calling for the University to cover the deficit, through increased employer contributions, with no detriment to UCU members.
- iii. Pay and working conditions
18. The UCU believe the pay of academic staff at Universities has dropped by around 17% in ‘real-terms’ since 2009 based on findings, from the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA).

19. In more 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.
20. The UCU put out two ballot questions in September 2019 for vote by UCU members, reflecting the complexity of this issue: 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of strike action?' and 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of action short of strike action up to and including a marking and assessment boycott?'.
21. At Royal Holloway, the turnout of UCU members voting in the ballot was 50.68%, reaching the 50% threshold required by the Trade Union Act 2016 to pursue action based on the outcome.
22. For the question 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of strike action?', 78.93% respondents at Royal Holloway said Yes and 21.07% said No, one ballot was blank. For the question 'Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of action short of strike action up to and including a marking and assessment boycott?', 83.97% of respondents at Royal Holloway said Yes and 16.03% said No.
23. The UCU are calling for the University to immediately take steps to reverse the supposed pay decline, by increasing staff pay.

iv. Financial implications

24. If the pension deficit and increased staff pay is covered entirely by the University, their budget would have to absorb this cost. It is important to understand that this would result in the potential for funds to be diverted away from other services and activities in order to pay for these higher employer pension contributions and higher salaries. This would potentially include services for students.
25. It is entirely legitimate that students therefore debate where they feel money should be spent, given the fact that institutions like Royal Holloway are majority funded by their tuition fees.
26. The UCU have chosen to combine these two different disputes into united industrial action.

**B. The Union Believes**

27. Students have a right to collectively decide the policy of the Students' Union in regard to the proposed UCU strike action.
28. The longevity of higher education requires a pension system that is fully funded and adequately supports those in the sector as well as adequate and fair pay for staff members. Staff perform better and students receive a better quality of education when they are secure and remunerated fairly. The USS pension scheme and fair pay is integral in providing security for university academic staff.
29. That everyone has the right to withdraw their labour and that everyone has the right to strike where they believe their rights as an employee have been infringed.
30. Industrial action causes high levels of disruption in UK universities, which mostly affects students. The Students' Union, as a membership charity, has a responsibility to advance the education of our members and campaign to support their interests.

### **C. The Union Resolves**

31. To take one of the following positions on the UCU strike action, determined by students through a cross campus preferendum ballot. The options presented below identify the four possible positions that students may take on the issue.
32. As the two disputes balloted by the UCU are combined into the same period of industrial action, these four 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, as the UCU have combined the two issues we will reflect that decision in this preferendum. Therefore the UCU's stance refers to their stance on both the pensions dispute and the dispute on pay and working conditions
  - a. To support the UCU's strike action and its stance in its entirety.
  - b. To support the UCU's stance regarding 'action short of strike', but reject the decision for wholesale strikes.
  - c. To support the UCU's stance, but reject any form of industrial action and ask all parties to convene further talks to establish a mutually agreeable way forward.
  - d. To reject industrial action and oppose the UCU's stance in its entirety.