

UCU Scotland Retired Members Chair's Report, November 2020

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INTRODUCTION

Our working year began with 2018-19 slipping into 2020. The AGM due last November was postponed into January to take account of a new round of UCU industrial actions – this time over salaries, working conditions and equalities as well as USS pensions.

The unprecedented solidarity displayed over the past two years marks a real change in the culture of UCU. Looked at from the perspective of the former AUT (and this includes the vast majority of Scotland-based UCU colleagues), this period began in the 1970s when the balance in AUT between being a professional association and a trade union began – with affiliation to the TUC and Scottish TUC – to shift in the direction of the latter.

The merger between AUT and NATFHE, over a decade ago now, reinforced that trajectory. But the demonstration that this union of committed professionals now feels forced – and able – to organise serious industrial action confirmed that times have changed and that university staff have, accordingly, had to change the way in which they defend their working conditions *and* their professionalism.

It is important to restate this since, before the most recent industrial actions were over, the world had changed again, and much ongoing activity had shifted to the back-burner of general consciousness. It is widely understood that the coronavirus pandemic has not only been devastating in its human impact, permeating every aspect of life and absorbing attention in a way only, and briefly, mitigated in Europe by the drama of the recent US presidential election; but that it has also brought to the surface many of the elements in an already well-advanced, multifaceted social crisis.

The problems facing everyone who works in UK higher education (HE) – and which their unions have had to confront, particularly since the Thatcherite 1980s – are an acute manifestation of that crisis. As retired members of UCU, we have, I think, a responsibility not only to remain alert to our own needs, but also to do what we can to assist our working colleagues in the legitimate, and necessary, defence of *their* interests, *and* to contribute our experience to the union's wider policy discussions. We have a role in the fight to ensure that – amidst unprecedented social and technological change and in the face of the increasing predominance of commercial short-termism and managerialist philistinism – the social and intellectual values of humane and scientific higher education and research that have underpinned most of *our* working lives are preserved.

Scotland has a distinctive place in what over the past decade has increasingly, in the UK, become a diverging group of national HE systems. The Higher Education Policy Unit (Bruce) Report on constitutional change and UK HE in 2012 – <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2012/04/16/universities-and-constitutional-change-in-the-uk-the-impact-of-devolution-on-the-higher-education-sector/> – acknowledged this ongoing trend, but largely from the point of view that the extreme neo-liberal model in England should be seen as the norm. UCU Scotland promoted a different perspective, seeing constitutional divergence as an opportunity for Scottish HE, with its distinctive tradition, to contribute meaningfully to rational public debate about alternative futures.

A series of public conferences (ongoing), beginning after the election in 2007 of an SNP government committed – against the Westminster consensus – to free university tuition, led to substantial submissions to the Scottish Government (see, for example, Report of the 'Intellect and Democracy Conference' accessible at <https://ucu.org.uk/publications?f=Sector&f=Sector%2C1364&f=Nation%2C1369&sort=Title&size=20>). This led to the union's being represented on the Scottish Government Advisory Group on HE Governance, chaired by Ferdinand von Prondzynski, the recommendations of whose 2012 review (<https://www2.gov.scot/resource/0038/00386780.pdf>) were partially implemented by the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2016/15/contents/enacted>).

This provided for some limited – but widely welcomed – measures of quasi-democratic reform. The union's input into the von Prondzynski agenda was based on the idea engagingly articulated in a talk given by the Cambridge intellectual historian and tireless campaigner against neo-liberal managerialism, Stefan Collini, at

one of the UCUS public conferences in Edinburgh in 2012. He remarked that Scotland had the ‘advantage’ – notwithstanding the need to avoid ‘a cheap romanticization of the “lad o’ pairts” tradition’ – of at least ‘having such a tradition to appeal to’, one which, moreover, is ‘a tradition with built-in democratic purchase and appeal.’ (See Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* [Verso, 2018 edition], p. 192.)

In the post-coronavirus (and of course, post-‘Brexit’) world that awaits, there are going to be major, new challenges. At the macro-policy level they will begin to emerge as the Scottish Funding Council ‘Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability’ (<http://www.sfc.ac.uk/review/review.aspx>), to the initial consultation stage of which UCUS – and also some individual UCUS Retired Members – have already contributed, moves into Phase 2.

Responses to this – and the HE policies that will play a substantial part in next May’s Holyrood elections – can also now be informed by the recent UCUS report on the role of automation in HE (<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10826/The-automatic-university---a-review-of-datafication-and-automation-in-higher-education>). And at our AGM we will also have an opportunity to contribute to discussion about a forthcoming UCUS document offering analysis of the current crisis in our universities and an ‘alternative vision’ for the future: this will underpin a union ‘manifesto’ for the election campaign.

To assist in our further deliberations on UCUS policy at this critical time this we are delighted to welcome John Holmwood to the public session of our virtual AGM. John (sometime of Edinburgh University) is emeritus professor of sociology at Nottingham, founder of the Campaign for the Public University, member of the Campaign for the Defence of British Universities and a lead author of the 2016 English *Alternative White Paper on Higher Education* (<https://heconvention2.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/awp1.pdf>), which has been widely read internationally.

I hope that many retired UCUS members will not only want to remain in the union, but also will feel able actively to contribute their expertise to our branch’s efforts to play a distinctive role in UCU’s work, recognising that what we can achieve in the special circumstances north of the border will matter not only to Scotland-based colleagues but will also be of interest UK-wide (and perhaps further afield too) – whether or not Scotland becomes a separate nation in the next few years.

PENSIONS, POLICY and POTENTIAL SOCIABILITY

Towards this end, our year, as Scotland Retired Members, has, I believe, seen important developments in the way we define our role in the wider union. Three themes seem to me to stand out: pensions, policy and the potential for sociability. I will focus on the first two but make a brief comment on the third.

On pensions, we benefit from regular reports from committee member Philp Burgess, reflecting on his role as a UCU representative on the National Pensioners Convention. We have an important part to play on behalf of our members in keeping at least a watching brief on threats to pensions posed by the promotion of the idea that the plight of younger people today – facing diminished opportunity, unemployment and relative poverty – is the responsibility of a privileged and selfish, post-war generation. The defence of the relative security of many of our members is not only a matter of self-interest, but also one of social responsibility – a defence of hard-won rights which, if surrendered, will not benefit generations to come but only further entrench inequalities in a society rooted in structural inequality. But recognising this *does*, I think, imply a further responsibility – to contribute to the formulation of policies to further the fight against inequalities, including intergenerational inequality. I see this as one UCU priority to which a retired members’ branch has a particular contribution to make.

On policy, our contributions (as exemplified above), can be made in various ways. Of course through the union’s annual conferences (Scottish and UK), where we are represented. But also via our participation in UCUS’s policy-making process and periodic consultation; and through involvement in the wider labour movement.

With regard to our participation in UCU congresses north and south of the border, we have two current intra-union campaigns. First, to secure the right to contribute to USS debates at UK UCU congress. At the moment

the anomaly is that – as a retired branch (and, everywhere except in Scotland, retired branches organise former members both from HE *and* from FE) – we participate only in full congress sessions, not to the HE sectoral sessions. This means that we are excluded from input to debates on USS, which are the business of the HE sector. And, second, to secure the right of our members to participate in the election of UCU Scotland honorary president. Again it is a constitutional anomaly dating back to the way the semi-autonomous status of the Scottish union was embedded in the rules of the merged UCU that currently prevents this.

To these ends, in the last year we have made representations to UCU Scotland to consider the role of retired UCU members in Scotland in the election of the UCU Scotland honorary president and proposed a motion – passed at the UCU Scotland Congress (held online) – to further protect pensions. And a proposed rule change designed to increase the representation of retired members in pension debates was submitted to (the much-postponed) UCU UK congress.

Equally important, and in addition to our contributions to the congress-centred process of UCU policy-making, is our participation in UCU Scotland’s advisory Education Committee and the general policy consultations it periodically initiates and conferences it assists the union’s Scottish executive in organising. As an example of this, our Branch review of UCU Scotland’s discussion paper on ‘The Automatic University’ (June 2020: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10827/New-UCU-Scotland-report-explores-impact-of-automation-in-universities>) led us to express our concerns about possible future implications of university partnerships with for-profit third parties, partly in response to the need to increase online provision in the wake of coronavirus, at a recent UCU Scotland’s Education Committee and to argue the case for institutional branches to undertake audits of such partnerships.

Locally, too, we have the opportunity to send delegates to – and participate in – the work of trades union councils, which, in Scotland, are affiliated to, and full participants in the work of, the Scottish TUC. At the moment, we do this only in Edinburgh, but the relevance of doing so has been shown more than ever this year as Edinburgh TUC has established a COVID-19 emergency committee, meeting virtually most weeks to exchange information about the cross-sectoral impact of the crisis on trade unionists: it has devoted a number of its meetings to the crisis in both HEIs and FE colleges, with the participation of UCU and EIS-Further Education Association Colleagues.

Regarding ‘potential sociability’, I have added this more as an alliterative aspiration than a reportable reality. From early in our history as a branch we have tried to find ways of bringing retired members together, either for public meetings than can advertise our existence and purpose – and we did this on a number of occasions, though with only modest success – or for social intercourse. It might be possible (and desirable, particularly in circumstances when some of our colleagues must be feeling isolated) to revive these initiatives taking advantage of the current virtual-communication realities.

What *can* be reported, and could be relevant both in that regard and in relation to our ongoing attempts to enhance recruitment to the branch is the progress we have made – led by Brian Martin and with the welcome support of UCU Scotland Executive – in developing our own website. With an upcoming ‘refresh’ of this, we are keen to have feedback from our members, along with suggestions about how it can be further enhanced to aid communication and active involvement amongst existing members, and perhaps as an aid to recruitment of new ones.

INTERNATIONALISM

UCU Scotland’s Education Committee is also its International Committee – advising on areas where we can meaningfully make policy and take it forward in practical ways. Our Retired Members’ Branch has been particularly supportive of Scottish Universities Supporting Palestinian Students (SUSPS): see <<https://en-gb.facebook.com/ScottishUnisSupportPalestine/>>. SUSPS campaigns both for Scottish universities to waive fees so that qualified postgraduates from Palestine can study here for a one-year Masters degree and for funds to support them while doing so. So far three students have successfully completed courses, two at QMU and one at the University of Aberdeen. The pandemic – and the need for a renewed push for funds (including by trying to get the Scottish TUC to find ways of translating its enthusiastic support into a practical financial scheme – have forced into a period of rethinking; but it remains an important matter on our agenda.

IN CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as Chair, and on your behalf, I would like to thank your Committee for what everyone has done in taking the work of the branch forward in this very difficult but surely pivotal year, in particular our new Secretary Mike Larkin, Membership Secretary Brian Martin, Treasurer Ann Kettle and vice-chair Tom McDonnell.

Terry Brotherstone
November 2020

Appendix

(a) UCU Scotland Congress motion:

‘Congress notes:

‘1. Calls to reduce pension benefits for those in receipt of occupational pensions, such as USS or TPS, has raised concerns about the perceived ‘generational unfairness’ in pension provision.

‘2. In the Guardian on 2nd December 2019, retired Professors of Law and Politics, Hadden and McLellan called for UCU and USS to make an “effort to share the burden of paying for adequate pensions for us all” and that “We have established that this can be done within the current law”.

‘3. Many in receipt of pensions have small incomes, they pay tax and have no means to defend themselves against reductions. It would be a gross breach of trust to reduce their income as they plan their future.

‘Congress urges:

‘UCU not to support any future attempts to reduce the benefits of those retired and in receipt of pensions such as USS or TPS.’

(b) UCU Congress rule change motion, SFC14:

‘Addressing the representation of retired members at Congress Scottish retired members branch Congress notes RMBs are only permitted to submit motions to main Congress. Congress further notes motions from RMBs on pensions, a legitimate concern to retired members, have been rejected because pensions business is reserved to sector conferences. To address the effective disenfranchisement of a category of members in an area of direct concern to them, Congress instructs NEC to consider how this issue might be addressed and include:

‘1. the introduction of a session in Congress where wider pension matters are discussed, recognising that the details of the two schemes remain the preserve of the relevant sector conference.

‘2. the addition to the CBC guidelines of a sentence to the effect that where an RMB submits a motion to Congress which is deemed by CBC to be sectoral but which is of clear and legitimate concern to retired members, said motion may be added to the appropriate sectoral business.’