



## Michaelmas 2019 UCU Strike Action – Briefing for MCRs

### What's happening?

- Members of the University and Colleges Union (which represents academics, lecturers, researchers, administrators, computing staff, librarians and postgraduate students at Cambridge and in other UK HE & FE institutions) are striking from University work for 8 days between 25/11 and 4/12 over two national disputes.
- This means that staff taking part will not undertake any work for the University in the 8 working day period between 25/11 and 4/12 (inclusive). UCU will also be asking staff not to enter University sites in this period. There will also be picket lines on many sites, which is where workers on strike protest at the entrances to workplaces.

### Why are the strikes happening?

- One dispute is a continuation of the 2018 industrial action over the USS pension scheme. Over the last decade, the Defined Benefit pension scheme received by many academics in older UK universities has seen a continual erosion, which UCU argue is not financially justified. More information is available [here](#).
- The other dispute is over pay, equality, casualisation and workload. Staff in all UK universities have seen a significant real-terms pay cut over the last few years, and the gender pay gap at Cambridge is 19%. Academic workloads have increased significantly to unsustainable levels, and more and more staff are on less secure contracts. This dispute is over a nationally-agreed framework to address these problems. More information about this dispute is available [here](#).

### Who can strike?

- Primarily, those on strike will be members of UCU who undertake work for the University.
- This includes academic staff who do teaching and research, but also many academic-related staff such as librarians, computing staff and administrators.
- The mandate to strike only relates to work undertaken from the University, so most undergraduate supervision is not covered. It is illegal to strike from college work.

Staff working for the University can go on strike even if they are not members of UCU, but they should be encouraged to join UCU if they intend to take part in industrial action as this offers them the best protection.

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Charity Number: 1147864

## What can MCRs do?

- Since MCRs are normally part of or are separately a charity, generally it has to be shown that any such support action is in benefit of your members. You need to show that the MCRs are achieving their objectives by supporting a strike (mainly representing students and providing them with welfare services and personal development). Supporting your teaching staff is a good example of this.
- Where it may be inappropriate is when it does not directly affect students – for e.g. spending money and resources to strike for a conflict in another country could be seen as a misuse of resources and not aligned with charitable objectives.
- One of the most important things that MCRs can do is provide clear information about what's happening to your members. The GU and CUSU will be providing this throughout the strike and are always available to answer questions from students.

## Showing solidarity as students

- There can be many ways of showing solidarity and supporting the staff on strike. Offering space, not crossing the picket line, assisting with banner making, emailing senior university administration to show support or organising leafleting are all examples of low-cost or free things you can do as an MCR.
- You can also direct resources to support for the strikes so long as you do so within the restrictions outlined above and in keeping with your democratic processes. MCRs & JCRs have in the past paid to print leaflets, placards or banners, or provided support for those on the picket line.
- Students choosing to show solidarity by not crossing a picket line can often be confused about what this means in practice. The GU interprets not crossing the picket line as not attending timetabled University activity during the strike period, and where possible not entering any University owned sites during the strike period.
- Students who are postgraduate researchers, or any other students who have compulsory laboratory sessions or need to submit a thesis, can be reminded that UCU are not trying to stop attendance at compulsory non-timetabled activities, such as personal use of laboratories. The GU's position is that it is still best to avoid crossing physical picket lines to reach these sites.

## Welfare and support

- Many support services, including the Disability Resource Centre (DRC) and University Counselling Service (UCS), may have staff who are on strike. The DRC and UCS are both located in the Student Services Centre (SSC) on the New Museums site and there will be a picket line at the Downing Street entrance to the site. However, UCU have confirmed that students will not be prevented from accessing the Student Service building, University Counselling Service or Disability Resource Centre. There will not be a picket line on the Bene't Street entrance to the New Museums Site and students will still be able to access the Student Services Centre via this entrance.
- Given that some DRC and UCS staff will be on strike, students may wish to show solidarity with them by rescheduling their appointment or calling in sick if necessary. However, we recognise that this will not be possible for all students who regularly rely on these services and we would never ask students to put their own health and welfare at risk. College-provided services (e.g. college counsellors) will be unaffected by strike action so you can still access their support.

- The Students' Unions will also be supporting students to self-organise study during the strike period. Some activities, such as seminars, can be conducted as group study sessions away from University sites. The SU Lounge at 17 Mill Ln will be available as an alternative study space throughout the strike period. Much of this, in addition to mentoring schemes, book sharing and more, will be organised on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1178276192377059>
- The Students' Unions' Advice Service offers free, impartial and confidential support and guidance to any student who needs it. They will be unaffected by the strike. You can make an appointment via the details at [studentadvice.cam.ac.uk](http://studentadvice.cam.ac.uk).

## Complaints and Recompense

- Where students are dissatisfied with the University, you should encourage them to voice that dissatisfaction by following the University's complaints procedure: [studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/](http://studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/). The Students' Unions' Advice Service can help to guide students through this process.
- One issue that was raised in previous round of industrial action was that of financial compensation for students who lost teaching time. The issue of refunds can be complicated, and there is no clear position about whether and for whom they are possible. Students who have questions about this can be referred to the Students' Unions' Advice Service, who are best placed to help on this issue.
- The Office for Students has also released [guidance for students affected by industrial action](#). It encourages them to complain to their institution in the first instance but indicates that this is likely to be a fast-moving and contentious area.

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