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20th anniversary of the 1997 UNESCO recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel

On this year's World Teachers' Day, I am contacting you about the continuing importance of the 1997 UNESCO recommendation on the status of higher education teaching personnel. This year is the 20th anniversary of the signing of the 1997 recommendation and a celebration event at UNESCO's Paris headquarters is taking place today.

The recommendation remains the most important international instrument in outlining the necessary parameters for academic freedom and in providing some form of redress for teachers' organisations. Above all, the recommendation identifies a number of key elements which are considered crucial to academic freedom, including:

- *Self-governance and collegiality* - "Higher-education teaching personnel should have the right and opportunity, ... to take part in the governing bodies ... while respecting the right of other sections of the academic community to participate, and they should also have the right to elect a majority of representatives to academic bodies within the higher education institution.... Collegial decision-making should encompass decisions regarding the administration and determination of policies of higher education, curricula, research, extension work, the allocation of resources and other related activities" (para 31, 32).
- *Tenure* - "Tenure or its functional equivalent, where applicable, should be safeguarded as far as possible even when changes in the organization of or within a higher education institution or system are made, and should be granted, after a reasonable period of probation, to those who meet stated objective criteria in teaching, and/or scholarship, and/or research to the satisfaction of an academic body", (para. 46).

Earlier this year, UCU published a report on the protection of academic freedom in the UK – in comparison with other EU nations. The report - written by Professor Terence Karran and Lucy Mallinson from the University of Lincoln - found that “[I]n sharp contrast with the other 27 EU nations, the constitutional protection for academic freedom (either directly, or indirectly via freedom of speech) in the UK is negligible, as is the legislative protection for the substantive (teaching and learning) and supportive (tenure and governance) elements of academic freedom.” Moreover, the report found that the UK continues to be non-compliant with key aspects of the 1997 UNESCO recommendation, particularly in respect of self-governance and collegiality and job security. Finally, the research document highlights worrying survey data from UCU members who report “statistically significantly higher levels of systematic abuse of their academic freedom, across a wide array of measures, than their European counterparts.”

We urge you to consider the important issues raised in the UCU-commissioned report (available at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/academic-freedom-in-2017>) and in particular to ensure that UK legislation and practice is compliant with the 1997 UNESCO recommendation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sally Hunt', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sally Hunt
General Secretary