

Message from your general secretary

A lot of my time over the past few weeks has been spent in meeting after meeting with government ministers and shadow ministers: trying to secure funding for further and adult education; keep our prison education members safe and on full pay; and protect higher education from the financial impact of the coronavirus pandemic. It's never easy getting direct support from a Conservative government, but we have had some successes along the way – from closing down face to face teaching in prisons, to ensuring that the government's job retention scheme can cover precarious staff.



UCU general secretary Jo Grady

This is a little different from how I was hoping to spend the spring. I intended to spend as much time as possible touring further education branches around the country, along the same lines as the higher education tour I did in the autumn – until Covid-19 caused our FE pay ballots to be suspended. I hope I'll get an opportunity to visit you in the near future, but in the meantime, I am really keen to attend remote meetings of your branch if you're having an issue in your workplace and would like my support. Please don't hesitate to get in touch via your regional staff.

I hope you are all doing ok under this lockdown and the immense challenges it is confronting us with. UCU has been working round the clock since March to support you in any way we can, with targeted advice and support for members, branch officers, and particular groups such as precarious and migrant staff – just have a look at our website to see the range of things we've been doing: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/covid19>

Regional office update

Although we are all now working from home, your local branch representatives have still been busy raising your concerns with employers across the region. We have been talking to employers about the practicalities of home working; the many health and safety implications; annual leave and the ability to carry over leave; as well as the new practice of furloughing staff. Your local UCU reps have also been working on getting in to strategic meetings about what is going to happen in the next academic year and what teaching models will look like from September. So while you might not be able to see us physically any more, rest assured we are still working hard on your behalf. If you have any queries about your working conditions then do please get in touch with your local UCU rep. Lydia Richards, UCU Regional Official.

eastern@ucu.org.uk W: <http://ehc.web.ucu.org.uk/>

Carry-Over of Annual Leave

The government has brought in new legislation which allows employees and workers to carry over up to four weeks' paid holiday into their next two holiday leave years where *"it was not reasonably practicable for a worker to take some or all of the leave to which the worker was entitled under this regulation as a result of the effects of coronavirus"*.

It should be noted that the new regulations refer only to statutory holiday entitlement (28 days including bank holidays), not any further contractual leave entitlement, and the additional carry-over applies only if it has not been reasonably practicable for a worker/employee to take their leave in the current leave year due to Covid-19. This does not give staff the automatic right to carry over four weeks leave but we are aware that many members will be unable to take their full leave entitlement due to sickness, caring responsibilities and / or workload at the current time.

This legislation allows your UCU branch to negotiate with your employer to adopt a flexible approach to taking leave and the carry-over of annual leave. It also means that your employer cannot use the legal situation to deny you the opportunity to carry over some of your annual leave. Please contact your branch in the first instance if you think this may affect you.

Full guidance on this and other aspects of taking leave during the Covid 19 crisis can be found on our website at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10874/UCU-guidance-on-Covid-19-and-annual-leave/pdf/ucu_covid19_annual-leave.pdf

Furlough Leave

The government has introduced a scheme (The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)) to support employers to keep staff on the payroll during the Covid 19 crisis. Where an employer is unable to offer work to a member of staff, the scheme allows an employer to put a member of staff on 'furlough leave' and recover 80% of staff salary from the scheme. Individuals employees must be paid through the PAYE payroll (where the employer deducts tax and national insurance) to be eligible for the scheme and the scheme currently runs until the end of June. You cannot be put on furlough leave without agreement but if you do agree your contract of employment continues and all other terms and conditions remain in place. The minimum period you can be furloughed is 3 weeks and during the furlough period you can do not work for, or for the benefit of, your employer.

The scheme can be applied to staff on full-time, part-time, hourly paid, variable hours (including zero hours) and agency staff.

There are some limits to employers who receive public funding in accessing the scheme but we are aware of employers in both FE and HE offering furlough leave to some groups of staff.

We would expect any FE, ACE, Prison or HE employer to top up staff pay to 100% if they are offered furlough leave.

For full guidance on the scheme and how it may affect you see:

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10842/UCU-guidance-on-the-Coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-rev-20-April/pdf/ucu_covid19_furloughed-staff-20apr20.pdf

Display Screen Equipment and H&S

You may find that your usage of display screen equipment (DSE) such as desktop computers and laptops has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is no evidence that use of DSE can cause permanent damage to the eyes, many people using DSE for prolonged periods can experience eye strain, visual fatigue, headaches and stress. Other health complaints relating to improper or overuse of DSE include a range of upper limb disorders and backache.

The DSE Regulations 1992 do not apply to temporary working arrangements but employers do still have a general duty to protect your health and safety at work. As such many employers have provided their temporary home workers with DSE self-assessment checklists and information and guidance relating to the safe set up of workstations.

Some preventative measures you can take include scheduling different work activities to break up your screen time and taking a break of 5-10 minutes for every 50-60 minutes of continuous screen time. You can set up simple reminders and alerts using your mobile phone or online calendars or download one of the many apps available online that can enforce break times or gently remind you to take a breaks at customisable intervals. In general, frequent short breaks are considered to be much more effective than fewer longer breaks and should be taken before the onset of fatigue and before any decline in productivity. For additional info: [HSE DSE Leaflet](#) and [DSE Regulations Guidance L26](#).