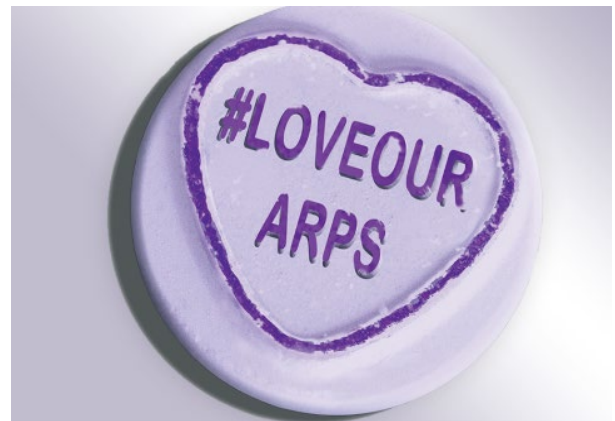


...and related

The Newsletter for Academic Related and Professional Services Staff in Higher Education

Welcome to the Spring 2020 edition of ...and related

As we write this newsletter, the UK has been on lockdown for over two months. We know that the current situation is affecting UCU members in lots of different ways, and you can find lots of advice and guidance that UCU has been producing on our website here - <https://www.ucu.org.uk/covid19> - with HE specific information here - <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10727/Information-for-HE-members>



Musings from the IT frontline

Have you seen the 2016 film Passengers? If so, you will already know how I and the three other IT staff that are key workers here in our department feel most days. If not, then I'm not giving the main plot away if I tell you that it's about a person who is brought out of suspended hibernation 90 years early on a transportation ship full of sleeping passengers. It can be lonely.

It is strange to sometimes be the only person in the building for eight hours or so; or sometimes be one of two (perhaps three) people in the building. Should we feel 'honoured' that we are key workers? In addition, why only ARPS staff? Of course, I have my suspicions as to the answer to the latter question but...

One of the reasons we need to come in are that tapes do not change themselves and we have not only backups on disk, but also to our sister site (Disaster Recovery) and to good old tape; it's certainly an air-gapped solution! This set up allows us to have at least three years' worth of backups; and yes, I have had to get really old data from tape more than once over the past twenty-seven years of working here.

Another reason is that, on more than one occasion, a remote user has shut down what they thought was their local PC or laptop and then realised that they actually shut down the remote PC they were working on. Meaning, of course, that we have to their PC and turn it on again. Also, sometimes rebooting a server after an update doesn't always go smoothly and you have to have some form of manual intervention to get it back on-line; impossible if you are, in my case, 14 miles away!

All the above are things that you could probably guess are consequences of the current lockdown situation. However, there are things that only become known after a month has gone by. One thing that happened, of course, was that all the buildings were physically locked since no one was going into them. This makes sense, and in our case, we contact security who let us into the building each day, but the cleaners are not around to clean, and as we gradually started to fill the bins and I grew concerned as to what would happen when they became full.

However, that concern was overtaken because having bins full of aging food meant that we came in towards the end of April to find we had mice running around! Not the best thing to happen and we've reported this and so we hope that things will soon be dealt with.

Having no cleaning staff also means that the toilets and, just as important, the anti-bac units were not being checked. We did not run out of gel, but we would have done eventually had the situation continued.

The lockdown to all intents and purposes happened 'overnight'. People were at work in the office one day and the next were told to work at home, which they obviously did. Therefore, we have a Mary Celeste situation in our building where it looks like people just vanished. Desks and offices have just been abandoned. This means that quite a few of them have biscuits, etc. on the desks; more mice food (!) as the people in there expected to be back the next day. Food was left in the fridges, which has had to be thrown away as the many and various 'use by' dates have come and gone. Not the most pleasant of jobs!

The IT office now resembles Kew Gardens because many staff have plants in their office and so we have gathered them all up and are looking after them during the lockdown. Our workshop will look sparse once people reclaim them!

I sincerely hope that, before all of you are back into your own offices, that someone somewhere has cleaned through your building – and you are all rodent free!

Paul Siddall, University of Essex

UCU Covid-19 guidance for academic-related/ professional services (ARPS) members in HE

For those like Paul who are having to attend work in person, UCU has produced some guidance to support safe working.

UCU is aware that some staff in areas such as IT and Facilities will need to provide a physically present skeleton staff to ensure that the institution can continue to function virtually.

Working on a campus or in buildings with few or no other staff can present its own set of risks. Members have raised their concerns with us about staff on site not being able to access clean toilets and other facilities; rubbish bins not being emptied; anti-bacterial hand gel not being available and left behind food leading to infestations of rodents and insects. These are all potential risks, and employers are required to address them.

Your employer should have already produced a preventative coronavirus specific risk assessment for the workplace in consultation with employees and H&S reps which should then be shared with the staff affected. A safe system of work should accompany this as appropriate, and this should include ensuring the cleanliness of the working environment and the ability to socially distance yourself from other staff who are working on site. The risk assessment should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure appropriate control measures are in place to prevent exposure to coronavirus and to reduce likelihood of transmission.

Employers must give you information about the risks in your workplace and how you are protected. They must also instruct and train you on how to deal with the risks.

The risk assessment should address all the issues that could arise including circumstances where the controls identified cannot be implemented, such as lack of the necessary Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). That is a real hazard and controls should be in place for the risk a lack of PPE presents. Although given PPE is the last step in the hierarchy of control to protect workers health and safety the control should then be that work does not continue on site until this is in place.

When requiring staff to physically attend work, your employer should consider how you can travel to work safely to minimise exposure to coronavirus. If you would usually travel by public transport, the employer could ensure workplace parking if you have access to a car or pay for taxis to facilitate safe travel. If someone is unable to travel to work without significant risk, then the employer should not force staff to travel, finding alternative work which can be carried out remotely.

If you have any concerns about your health and safety, you should raise it directly with your manager and make sure your local UCU branch representative is copied in. See also Thompsons Solicitors briefing on employer and employees' responsibilities in the wake of coronavirus.

The full guidance can be found here:

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10891/ARPS-Covid-19-guidance/pdf/ucu_covid19_arps.pdf

Report back from Academic-Related Professional Services Staff (ARPS) National Annual Meeting, 12 March 2020

Election of ARPS Committee

The first part of the Meeting was the national ARPS Committee AGM. Delegates heard a report (over telelink) from Jess Meacham (Sheffield) the Deputy Chair of the ARPS Committee on the work that had been undertaken since the last Meeting in 2019. After hearing the report new members of the Committee were elected to serve from 2020. With four vacancies and three nominations this election was uncontested with Derek Keenan (Strathclyde), Chloe Nast (Goldsmith's) and Paul Siddall (Essex) being elected.

Raising ARPS concerns with UCU's National Executive Committee

Following the elections, business turned to motions mandating the ARPS Committee to raise an array of matters of pressing concern for the union's non-academic membership with UCU's National Executive Committee. This included ensuring appropriate and proportionate membership for ARPS members on branch committees and in local negotiating meetings (ARPS members make up around twenty percent of UCU's membership at pre-1992 universities) and two motions calling on the NEC to adopt and promote a campaign focused upon improving the situation of ARPS members within higher education. All of the motions passed and will be sent on to the NEC with a few minor amendments.

Better understanding the experiences and priorities of ARPS members

After the formal AGM part of the meeting, delegates heard a presentation on the results of the ARPS staff survey UCU conducted in the autumn of 2019, and the branch survey carried out in early 2020. These surveys ascertained information about the experience of ARPS staff at the coalface in their institutions and gathered information about issues local branches perceive to impact upon their ARPS members.

The three key issues facing ARPS members as uncovered in the membership survey (which was completed by the equivalent of around thirty percent of UCU's ARPS membership) were workload, career progression and pay. Which were followed in terms of how often they were cited by work autonomy, flexible working practices and "the withdrawal of resources from... area or service". In contrast to other sections of UCU's membership such as those engaged in research and teaching job insecurity was ranked comparatively far down the scale of concerns, as encouragingly; were the issues relating to workplace bullying, equalities and the threat of outsourcing.

Under-representation of certain ARPS roles in UCU membership

These findings were doubtless however, conditioned by the sections of the ARPS workforce that tend to become UCU members. Collectively around a third of those who had completed the survey worked in either IT support or librarian roles, with many others who had filled it in apparently working in comparable and allied areas that are also concerned with technical work and the management of information within institutions. Likewise a great many of these workers had been employed at their current institution for over a decade. In the case of the IT workers

surveyed over half had worked at their current institution for more than fifteen years, with large proportions of responding members in other work fields having served for a similar length of time.

This probably partly explains the range of concerns that the membership survey highlighted. Many respondents to the survey indicated that they were trapped at the top of the grade they were employed on (typically corresponding to Birmingham Grade Seven or Eight) and reported that their institution offered limited pathways for progression beyond this point. This suggests that ARPS staff, who are overwhelmingly university graduates, often with masters degrees and PhDs in addition to undergraduate level qualifications, frequently find themselves thwarted when it comes to opportunities to progress in their careers and receive more money for gaining in experience in the job they do.

The challenge of representing younger and more precarious ARPS staff

It is right that UCU is fighting for the longstanding members working in these fields and putting pressure, as the forthcoming “Love our ARPS staff” campaign will do, upon employer’s representatives and individual institutions to do more for staff working in these categories. However, as a younger member employed part-time on a fixed term contract, I felt that the survey also showed how UCU is currently failing to recruit and represent staff working across higher education institutions. Especially in parts of the university where staff are more likely to be younger, have a less clear sense of professional identity, and be more likely to be casualised.

Recruiting younger members, and recruiting and campaigning in parts of the workplace which are more casualised is a challenge for all unions, not just UCU. However, the exponential expansion of specialist roles in higher education related to student recruitment, wellbeing and experience, as well as jobs connected to research support and impact, as well as institutional image and reputation, alongside the general growth in university administrative labour as institutions have increased in size, offers opportunities for UCU to reach and engage with new and emerging layers of staff and work cultures. This makes the survey results interesting in terms of what they show about who UCU’s current ARPS members are, and the sections of the ARPS staff that it is currently struggling to reach.

Speaking up for ARPS members at Birmingham

As an activist within Birmingham UCU, which has good ARPS representation on its branch committee, but little recent history of campaigning extensively on exclusively ARPS related issues, the event was also a great opportunity to hear about what other institutions and branches are like. After hearing the presentation on the survey results, in groups based upon the tables where we were sat, delegates workshopped a campaign that could be run locally to demand a better deal for ARPS staff. Based upon talking to the people I was working with alone, I discovered that Southampton has a branch officer dedicated to working and campaigning on ARPS issues and that Sussex has an ongoing problem with “grade drift” and ARPS staff being downgraded from being on the academic pay scale and enrolled in USS to being on the Support Staff part of the pay spine. It was excellent to be able to share

information and tips in this way with other activists, and it will inform the work that I do with Birmingham UCU in future.

Taken together, as well as having the chance to find out more about how UCU works as a national organisation to represent and campaign on issues which matter to university workers, and to help shape national policy, the real value of attending the meeting was in having the chance to listen, learning and talk with other activists about the problems and challenges we face at work and ways in which these can be successfully surmounted through collective action.

Having attended lots of political gatherings in my time, but never a UCU national event before, I was a bit worried; especially given that UCU ARPS members tend to be older, that I'd be the youngest person there by quite some way. However, it was great that in fact there was a good range of activists present (although the members in attendance were predominantly white and British) from across the age spectrum and drawn from an array of university functions. This makes me confident that both nationally and in our branches it will be possible to reach out, organise and diversify the array of ARPS staff that we represent, so as to be able to make collective progress on the issues facing both longstanding and newer members.

Josh Allen, Birmingham UCU committee member

Coping with lockdown

When asked to write about how I was coping during the Covid outbreak, my initial response was "I'm not!" So I shut my laptop to avoid it. They've asked the wrong person! Then I thought about it and after a little reflection, realised I am coping. Some days I "cope" better than others but I am coping nonetheless.

I work in the Wellbeing and Disability Team of a London University and being in a position supporting others necessitates awareness of my own difficulties, challenges and limitations. I have a diagnosis of anxiety, depression and OCD, which pose their own difficulties, but even without those diagnosis I found the weeks immediately before and after the announcement of lockdown extremely difficult.

The rate of change and information to grapple was and is intense. The scramble to work from home, the challenges of communicating effectively remotely, adapting to new tools and systems, keeping up to date with policy changes and understanding how each Department continues to deliver learning and assessment in their own way along with the all round uncertainty has been overwhelming. All the while we have continued to support students.

The Wellbeing Team has been understandably inundated with requests for support from students. Providing welfare support remotely having obvious difficulties, primarily in regard to checking in and assessing risk. Conversely the Disability Team has been relatively quiet, a trend expected to reverse as we see students becoming increasingly aware of the expectations of them and their ability to engage in these new methods of learning and assessment for which they may require adjustments.

So how am I coping in all of this?

Routine. This has allowed me to set expectations for myself. Large chunks of my routine are dedicated to balancing parenting, home schooling and work (in that order). It also includes; exercise; regular healthy eating; walking the dog; food shopping; cooking; and simply showering and getting dressed. I have even scheduled dedicated "covid time" to engage (or limit engagement) with the news and discuss concerns. Most importantly, my schedule includes rewards, like a favourite chocolate bar, engaging in a hobby, calling a friend or engaging in an activity for no reason other than the joy it brings me. It's the little things.

I've not been as productive in any aspect of my life as I would have liked, but I don't expect to be either. Whilst frustrating, accepting this has certainly helped me to cope.

My routine has helped me to keep some kind of structure and motivation, providing comfort and control, and some days it simply helps me to get out of bed in the morning. Accepting bad days are inevitable has been fundamental to it all. When I am feeling jaded I like to be reflective, and whilst I continue to enjoy supporting students, I know I will be able to cope.

UCU member at a London University, in the Wellbeing and Disability Team

It is possible to be flexible after all

A job that allowed me to work flexibly from home was my dream. I have a moderately disorganised husband, a three-year old daughter, a dog, and familial caring responsibilities. Having the ability to avoid the frantic morning rush to ensure everyone is ready to go, and then gets to where they need to be, when they need to be there, would certainly lower my stress levels. I have never understood the idea of presenteeism, whereby workers are confined to their office for the duration of a standard working day, no matter what, when most of our jobs do not require that level of rigidity. I firmly believe some degree of flexibility over where, when and how we work would vastly improve the oft-discussed work-life balance. I also believe, for me anyway, this different approach would allow me to be more productive. I am not alone in these views. In May 2019, TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady penned an article stating there are an estimated four million of us who would like to work from home, at least part of the time. Back then it seemed like a topic that would remain theoretical, however less than twelve months later, millions of workers in the UK found themselves on a mandatory working from home arrangement following government orders. What followed this order was interesting to say the least.

I have represented several members on cases around flexible working requests and have had conversations with reps from other branches and sister unions about their experiences in this area. The most common observation is that practically every request for flexible working has an equality element to it. Be it, for example, a woman making the request for caring reasons, or a colleague returning to work after illness and wanting a reasonable adjustment to working practices. No one I have spoken to has ever heard of a request being made on what could be perceived to be less than the most deserving of grounds. Despite this, there seems to be a theme in these processes. There is a willingness to discuss amendments to contracted hours,

however when the topic of working from home is broached, it is met with a flat refusal. Reasons for this include the following: the inability to work while juggling caring responsibilities due to a requirement for the staff member to be able to report to the workplace immediately should it be required; the lack of available technology to facilitate remote working; the idea that it would be unfair to other staff whose jobs dictate that they cannot work remotely; and the imperative of being in the office during the standard working day 'just in case' something comes up. As we have learned over the last x number of weeks (I have genuinely lost track), these reasons are really not valid.

The speed at which our universities have accommodated a switch to home-based working for hundreds, maybe thousands, of us overnight and with relatively little disruption reveals that from a technological standpoint, remote working can be facilitated with ease. We are savvy enough to adapt to and embrace the new software that has become a staple part of our working day. For a large proportion of us, there would never be an event to deal with that required us to be immediately physically present in our workplaces. If face-to-face interaction is required, the technological solutions have proven to be very effective. Preferable sometimes perhaps, I mean, wearing pyjama bottoms to a meeting in the office would surely be frowned upon, whereas at the minute, it is the norm (or maybe that's just me).

The battle to balance professional obligations with our home lives and any caring responsibilities is new, and for many, extremely difficult, however the circumstances in which we are operating at the moment are truly extraordinary. Those of us lucky enough to work for responsible institutions are frequently reminded, we are not currently working from home, but are at home trying to work in a crisis. So, what of the aftermath of and recovery from said crisis. What will working patterns and environments look like?

It is clearly incorrect that working flexibly, including working from home, cannot be accommodated. It has been proven to work now, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Some colleagues will have decided remote working is not for them. They may be clambering to get back to the workplace, the bustle and interactions, their co-workers and barista coffee. Maybe the daily commute will now be viewed as an opportunity to enjoy singing along with the radio in the privacy of cars as opposed to the stress-filled trek that it was a few short months ago. Alternatively, some will be invigorated by the loosened grip on their physical presence that remote working has brought. Many will be enthused by their reduced carbon footprint, others by their increased productivity gained from the ability to avoid the distractions of spending long hours in large, unpleasant, open-plan offices, and some emboldened by the confidence that comes from having more control over how work is completed. Reduced traffic through our workplaces will reduce the impact of a feared second wave of COVID-19. It will also cut down on the spread of other seasonal illnesses like stomach bugs and common colds.

This horrendous pandemic has brought much suffering, stress and uncertainty, and the prospect of a return to the safety of the familiar is comforting. We cannot forget however, that the capitalist system in which we live will be viewing the aftermath of this crisis as an opportunity. Naomi Klein covered this superbly in her book 'Shock Doctrine'. As trade union

members, we should consider what changes we want to see going forward and demand that our ideas be heard and input considered. This should start with opportunities to protect our mental health and encourage a healthy work-life balance, and to push for modernisation of our universities' employment policies and practices. Punitive attendance and absence management procedures are outdated and counter-productive. Consultation and more choice on working conditions must be considered as part of our employers' recovery plans.

Fiona McGarry, Queen's University Belfast

2020-2021 Academic-Related and Professional Services Staff Committee

Tim Barrett, Bath (Chair)

Jess Meacham, Sheffield (Vice Chair)

Vicky Blake, Leeds

Derek Keenan, Strathclyde

Kamie Kitmitto, Manchester

Fiona McGarry, Queen's University Belfast

Chloe Nast, Goldsmiths

Paul Siddall, Essex

Jo McNeill, Liverpool (NEC Rep)

