

24 March 2022

Nadhim Zahawi
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Via e-mail Sec-OF-STATE.PS@education.gov.uk
CC Michelle Donelan
Minister of State for Universities
Via e-mail Universities.PS@education.gov.uk

Dear Secretary of State,

I am writing to draw your attention to a new report that the University and College Union will publish tomorrow based on a survey of almost 7k staff currently working in UK universities.

The survey was conducted from 25 February – 2 March and just days after university employers in the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension scheme cut 35% from a typical employee's guaranteed retirement income.

The report into the survey results, titled 'UK Higher Education – a workforce in crisis', an embargoed copy of which follows this letter contains many deeply worrying findings and reveals a crisis of morale in the university workforce that could put the sector on a collision course with a recruitment and retention crisis.

Our report finds that two thirds of staff are likely or very likely to leave higher education in the next five years because of declining pay, pensions and working conditions.

More worrying still, youngest staff members are the most likely to leave the sector, with 81% of those surveyed saying they plan to exit higher education in the UK within the next five years.

In over two thousands examples of personal testimony, staff repeatedly told us of a crisis in morale across roles and higher education institutions, one which we fear threatens the very future of higher education in the UK.

Beyond the headline figures, there is also serious cause for concern about the future of research within our universities. Almost three in four researchers say they will leave higher education over deteriorating pay and working conditions. For postgraduate students, the figure is four in five.

The deep malaise within the sector and toxic working culture has become so dominant that almost nine in 10 (88%) respondents said they were not optimistic or not at all optimistic about the future of higher education in the UK. The majority (57%) of

respondents said they were unhappy or very unhappy about spending the remainder of their career in higher education.

Our report is a clear warning to vice chancellors and governments of the UK that the continued mistreatment of staff is putting the sector's future in doubt.

The role of the government as a custodian of higher education cannot be underestimated, especially if the sector is to play a central role levelling up and growing the economy.

Many respondents to our survey highlighted university governance as a key reason for their dissatisfaction in the sector. A weakening of statutes at many institutions, creeping managerialism and a lack of staff voice on governance structures – all in the context of an increasingly marketised sector - has led to a lack of confidence amongst staff about the direction of travel that the sector is taking.

Governments in England, Wales and Northern Ireland should follow Scottish good practice and take measures to strengthen university governance, drawing on the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act of 2016, which legislates that staff and trade unions are represented on governing bodies and also ensures there are elected chairs on university governing bodies.

We hope vice chancellors will address the findings in this report but in the meantime my union and its members are calling on the Department for Education to instruct university employer to resolve the current dispute and also launch a formal review of governance within the higher education sector. As our report makes clear, the lack of proper governance or accountability is a key reason for staff dissatisfaction and must be addressed if staff confidence is to be rebuilt.

The Department for Education in England should also evaluate the impact which quality assurance mechanisms such as the Teaching Excellence Framework and Research Excellence Framework are having a detrimental impact on staff workload in higher education.

We hope vice chancellors will be prepared to address the findings in this report but in the meantime we believe the findings are so serious that further exploration is required by government.

I hope you are able to find the time to study the contents of the report carefully and I would, of course, would be more than happy to meet to discuss further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dr Jo Grady

General Secretary