

UK higher education

A workforce in crisis

March 2022

A report by University and College Union

Introduction

The UK's university sector is widely admired for its world class teaching and research. From Covid-19 to climate change, UK universities are leading the world in response to major global challenges and it is clear that there is much to be proud of.

Today, almost 2.8 million students are studying in our universities, an increase of around 15% since 2016¹. This is an indication of how important universities are to our society and economy, and a vote of confidence in the tens of thousands of university staff who dedicate themselves to education.

But the success of our university sector masks a worrying reality for staff on campuses. A reality in which staff are demoralised, angry and anxious about the future of higher education itself.

A decade of decline for pensions, pay and working conditions

In UK universities, the last decade has seen a rapid rise in insecure employment and excessive workloads at the same time as pay and pensions have been eroded.

Around 70,000 academics are employed on temporary, fixed-term contracts, whilst around 66,000 more are employed via atypical contracts which lack basic employment protections.²

A series of below inflation pay offers means the value of staff pay has fallen by more than a quarter (25.5%) since 2009, with equality pay gaps meaning women, black and minority ethnic and disabled staff are being hit even harder.

Meanwhile, cost-cutting measures combined with a rise in managerialism and the use of arbitrary metrics for assessing quality have led to hugely increased pressures on staff time, impacting their mental health and wellbeing.

For the 204,000 education staff who have their pensions in the Universities Superannuation Scheme,³ £240k on average has been cut from their retirement income since 2011. Further cuts to USS pensions introduced this year will see a typical lecturer lose 35% from their guaranteed retirement income.

● **Pay down 25.5% since 2009**

● **70k academic-related staff on temporary contracts**

● **15k academic related staff on temporary contracts**

● **£240,000 cut from the average member's pension since 2011**

● **Half of staff reporting signs of depression⁴**

● **One in five academics staff working an extra 16 hours (2 days) per week⁴**

● **The gender pay gap in UK universities is 16%, whilst the disability pay gap is 9% and the race pay gap is up to 17%.**

The failure of university employers, represented by Universities UK and University and Colleges Employers Association, to address staff concerns about these issues has driven a series of industrial disputes which has seen almost annual disruption to student learning and an erosion of goodwill within the sector. This academic year alone, members have taken part in at least 13 days of action over pay and conditions and pensions.

The intransigence on the part of employers has not only been met with anger by UCU members but also a deepening sense of unhappiness about the way universities are being managed. The weakening of staff involvement in university governance has led to a growing disconnect between the decisions of leaders and their effects on staff.

Revealing the extent of the problem

It is for this reason UCU conducted a survey of members in UK higher education. We wanted to test the extent to which these feelings were being replicated across universities in the UK. We asked members about their roles, their views about the future of higher education and how they felt about the lack of progress on the issues we know matter to them.

The results, gained from almost 7,000 responses, are not for the faint hearted. Nor are the 2,036 examples of personal testimony from university staff who described in detail how angry and demoralised they feel.

Many UCU members feel deeply undervalued by university leaders and very few are optimistic about the future of the sector. To our members, the attacks on their pensions, pay and working conditions are not just deeply unfair, but also undermine their professionalism, preventing them from delivering the quality of education they would like to. Almost eight in ten reported feeling held back from doing their job properly, a figure which should send shockwaves through what is held up to be a globally renowned sector.

Three in five members (60%) told us the lack of progress over pay and working conditions means that they are likely to leave the sector in the next five years. For those facing further cuts to their USS pensions, this figure rises slightly to 61%.



Overall two-thirds of respondents said they were likely or very likely to leave the university sector within the next five years because of pensions, pay and working conditions

The findings also raise serious questions about the future of the sector and whether it will be able to deliver on its foundational purposes whilst staff are so chronically undervalued. Four in five (81%) of the youngest staff, aged between 18 and 29, are considering leaving higher education in the next five years due to lack of progress on pay and conditions, with a majority of all workers citing workload, pay and casualisation as the biggest drivers. The impact of employer policies also extends to research, with three quarters of those in research roles saying they are likely or very likely to leave the sector.

Universities can afford to do better

Rather than investing in the staff who make higher education work, university leaders have continued to hoard tens of billions in financial reserves and spend eye-watering sums on extravagant building projects, expensive advertising, and advice from management consultancies designed to give them a competitive edge. Today, we are seeing universities behave more like corporations vying to win a bigger share of the market, rather than focussing on investment which reflects their role as centres of learning and scholarship.

According to HESA, between the years of 2009/10 and 2019/20 expenditure on staff as a proportion of overall income has fallen from 54.4% (2009-2010) to 47.2% (2019-2020), allowing sector-wide surpluses to expand to £3.5bn in 2019/20. It is a myth that higher education institutions cannot afford to treat or compensate their staff better; they are simply choosing not to.

University finance figures show that tuition fee income has also risen by a third in the past five years to £21.5bn.³ The average remuneration package for vice-chancellors is £269k per year, with some earning as much as £500k annually.

Time for change

The testimony in this report should make vice chancellors and government ministers sit up and listen. No other UK sector so central to society and the economy has seen such a rapid and intense proliferation or combination of toxic working conditions. In fact, the reason the sector has been able to expand at the speed it has is because staff have been pushed to breaking point, cultivating a deep malaise in our universities.

Students deserve better than an education delivered by overworked, underpaid, and highly stressed staff. UK higher education employers can afford and have a duty to address this.

In this report, we make a series of recommendations for employers and politicians across the UK. Without action, we will see an exodus of staff from the sector and grave threats to the quality of education staff are able to deliver in light of the unrealistic demands being made on their time.

This report and the heartfelt responses of university staff is a gift to vice chancellors and governments across the UK. They must not waste it. The responsibility to build a genuinely just and world-leading sector is theirs.

Report results

Pay and working conditions

Three in five (60%) respondents said they were likely or very likely to leave the university sector within five years because of pay and working conditions.



Respondents who are hourly paid are twice as likely to say they are 'very likely' to leave the sector compared with those who are permanent (57% vs 29%)



4 in 5 postgraduate students said they were likely or very likely to leave the sector in the next 5 years



Almost 3 in 4 researchers (74%) likely or very likely to leave sector in the next 5 years

'I don't want the life of an academic, where one is expected to do the equivalent of three jobs while continuously fighting not only for research funding, but for fair pay. My partner left academia and earns substantially more than I. I see very little future joy and fulfilment in advancing within the institution as it is today.'

**A research academic on a fixed term contract at the University of Edinburgh
(5–9 years in the sector)**

'Combined with the constant fixed term contracts and below-industry pay, I am currently not considering a long-term career in academia and will likely leave within the next 2–3 years.'

**A research academic under 30 years old at the University of Nottingham
(1–4 yrs in the sector)**

'I am currently applying for academic jobs that enable me to leave my current institution, and am actively looking to leave the UK for better paying academic jobs in countries where academic pay provides better quality of life.'

**A lecturer at the University of East Anglia
(15–19 years in the sector)**

'I am in my 30s, with student loan debt and on short term, casualised contracts. I often earn – throughout the year - less than the minimum wage. I am the most highly educated person in my family and yet the one on the lowest income. The current situation means that first generation academics and people from lower class backgrounds will not succeed in this system. There is no security and it is impossible to have a family.'

**A lecturer on an hourly-paid contract at King's College London
(less than 1 year in the sector)**

When asked about which aspects of pay and conditions were the main drivers for reporting wanting to leave the sector, almost three quarters of respondents (74%) cited workload, while around three in five cited pay (59%). Over a quarter of staff (28%) cited casualisation while 14% highlighted pay inequality as a key reason.

Many of those who cited workload as the main reason for wanting to leave the sector pointed to high levels of burnout and the ways in which the expectations of management prevented them from doing the quality teaching and research they had joined the sector to deliver. Several responses spoke about the impact not just of institutional approaches to management, but of government policies which have added unnecessary layers of bureaucracy to working lives.

'Still love my job in theory but in practice, it's leading me to burnout and I don't have time and energy to focus on the things that make me feel happy about my career, namely research and teaching.'

An academic at the University of Kent (5–9 years in the sector)

'I am tired of the endless sense that I am not on top of the work that never stops coming in. I am tired of endless requests for info on this, that or the other that are "needed" so a report can be made. I am tired of being told for 25 years that we are not bringing in enough money so we must try harder. I am tired of being managed by people who do not listen when we complain about workload. And I am tired of the complete failure of senior management of Universities of the UK to take seriously their duty of care to maintain high standards of well-being for their staff.'

A lecturer at the University of Aberdeen (30+ years in the sector)

'Government policy making quality teaching and research impossible, teaching solely with metrics in mind, not the benefit of the students.'

A lecturer at SOAS (10–14 years in the sector)

'In a sector driven more than ever by auditing culture (REF, TEF, QEF, etc.), these processes, which are meant to ensure transparency and quality, do neither and are actually 'rituals of verification' concerned only with procedural compliance. The effect of this has been the growth in managers at the expense of academics and support staff.'

A lecturer at the University of Nottingham (20–24 years in the sector)

‘I feel undervalued, overworked, and generally despondent, with no chance of career development. Wish I'd never gone into academia.’

A lecturer at Keele University (20–24 years in the sector)

‘Workloads for academic related staff in faculties and schools are unsustainable. We see our academic colleagues struggling and want to support and professionalise the service Schools provide to staff and students but it is difficult as we are burning out and there is no common or consistent framework across HE so some institutions are chronically underfunding administrative and development posts.’

Academic-related worker at Ulster University (5–9 years in the sector)

USS pensions

More than three in five (61%) of respondents said they were likely or very likely to leave the university sector in the next five years over cuts to USS pensions.

- Respondents aged 60+ (71%) and those aged 18–29 (67%) are the most likely to leave over cuts to pensions

- Casualised staff are 10 percentage points more likely to say they were likely or very likely to consider leaving the sector (hourly paid & fixed term 68%, permanent 58%)

‘The situation with pay and pensions is existential for me. Even though I am now on a permanent contract, I do not anticipate that I will be able to live comfortably in retirement after a long career in HE. So much as I love it, I am considering my options outside the sector.’

A lecturer at the University of Kent (5–9 years in the sector)

‘I worked so hard to be able to embark on a career in academia, and now I just feel so duped. I can't understand why universities don't want to retain talent and treat staff with respect. I worry constantly about my future, and with cuts to pensions I now worry about mine and my family's long term future as well. For the first time since embarking on an academic career about 5 years ago I am seriously considering an alternative career.’

A research academic on a fixed term contract at Durham University (5–9 years in the sector)

‘I'm an early career researcher and consequently am likely to be one of the hardest hit by the pension cuts. Combined with the constant fixed term contracts and below-industry pay, I am currently not considering a long-term career in academia and will likely leave within the next 2-3 years.’

A research academic on a fixed term contract at the University of Nottingham (1–4 years in the sector)

‘Academic pensions used to be a real benefit to working in academia, but this is no longer the case. Starting my first postdoc and finally earning an income, while having to pay off loans for my education until now, and finding out that pensions are cut by 35% is absolutely demotivating. It makes me consider leaving academia altogether, while I wanted to do research and teach since I was 12 years old.’

A research academic on a fixed term contract at the University of Edinburgh (1–4 years in the sector)

A demoralised workforce

88% of respondents said they were not optimistic or not optimistic at all about the future of higher education in the UK.

- **57% of respondents said they were unhappy or very unhappy about spending the remainder of their career in higher education**

- **78% of respondents said employers’ failure to address issues around terms and conditions was preventing them from doing their job as well as they would want to**

The testimony received from the survey shows that the erosion of pensions, pay and working conditions is clearly having a significant impact on the wellbeing of staff in the sector. Many respondents reported serious concerns about their mental health and extremely low morale was a consistent theme.

‘I am very unhappy about the prospect of sending the rest of my career in UK higher education, not higher education generally. Recent changes have encouraged me to consider moving abroad more than leaving higher education.’

A lecturer at Swansea University (5–9 years in the sector)

‘I have been applying for jobs outside academia/HE since January. My mental and physical health have taken such toll by being in UK academia that I don't think I'd survive to see my 40s if this continues.’

A research academic under 30 years old on a fixed term contract at University College London (1–4 years in the sector)

‘I don't think anger, pain, or frustration adequately describe how I feel any longer. I've been through all of these emotions back when I cared - when I cared about the institution, when I cared about what higher education stood for, when I cared about strategies and missions and values. All this has been eroded so much over the years, and proven to be such huge hypocritical lies, that all I feel now is complete numbness and disengagement. There's so much wrong in higher education that I no longer believe it is fixable – the mentality is too engrained, the managers too disconnected, the purpose of education too completely distorted. The reality is that it is no longer a viable career path. All that was good about it has slowly been stripped off over the years. Luckily, we are a very skilled workforce and our talents in demand elsewhere.’

A lecturer at the Open University (15–19 years in the sector)

Poor governance and disconnected management

Many respondents to the survey also highlighted problems with university governance as a key reason for their dissatisfaction. 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.

‘There was a time when Council and VCs could be held to account by Senate and other consultative bodies. For various reasons, those days are long gone. There is now very little consultation and there has been a prolonged campaign of academic disempowerment enacted by a self-serving management. Self-appointed Councils are inconsistent with EDI objectives and as a form of governance were not appropriate for the 20th century never mind the 21st. UCU should be campaigning for a root and branch reform of higher education governance in which workers have a vote on appointments to Council and University Executive Boards. Without reform of governance, the British university sector is stuffed and will stop being world-leading within a generation.’

A lecturer at the University of Southampton (30+ years in the sector)

All these issues arise from the seemingly unstoppable growth of a parasitic management structure that seeks to impose a corporate structure that is wholly unsuited to universities and what they are there to do. We must insist that universities make proper use of such democratic processes in their constitutions; and then take things further to insist that decisions are made democratically by university staff -- the people who actually do the research and teaching -- and not the wasteful and damaging middle management.

A lecturer at the University of Sheffield (10–14 years in the sector)

A terminal threat to higher education

The results of the survey simply reinforce what our members have been telling us for years – that they and their colleagues have reached breaking point. If there was any doubt that the university workforce is in crisis, that must no longer be the case.

The sector needs urgent change. Without action, not only will we see an exodus of talented and experienced staff in the coming years, but the sector will become increasingly unattractive to new staff. Those who remain will continue to struggle to do their jobs to the best of their ability because of the endemic insecurity, unrealistic workload demands and lack of respect for their professionalism.

Ultimately, it is students who will pay the price unless action is taken to turn the tide.

Recommendations

In order to address the concerns outlined above, UCU has four key recommendations for employers and politicians, as follows:

1. In the short term, employers must urgently address the concerns of staff on the issues of falling pay, pension cuts, casualisation, pay inequality and workload. This would be the first step in preventing an exodus of staff over the coming years.
2. The Education Select Committee should launch an inquiry into the wellbeing of staff and the working culture in UK higher education.
3. Governments in England, Wales and Northern Ireland should take measures to strengthen university governance, drawing on the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act of 2016, which:
 - ensures staff and trade union representation on governing bodies
 - democratises institutions through the introduction of elected chairs of governing bodies.
4. The Department for Education in England should evaluate the impact which quality assurance mechanisms such as the Teaching Excellence Framework and Research Excellence Framework are having on staff workload in higher education.

Methodology

UCU sent an electronic survey via email to its members in higher education.

The survey was open from 25 February–2 March.

It received 6,761 responses.

After calculations, the percentages in the survey have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number.

For further details about the survey and the methodology, please contact tcolclough@ucu.org.uk

Notes

¹<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/01-02-2022/sb261-higher-education-staff-statistics>

²<https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/01-02-2022/sb261-higher-education-staff-statistics>

³USS: https://www.uss.co.uk/news-and-views/latest-news/2021/07/07272021_uss-publishes-report-and-accounts-covering-an-extraordinary-year

³Education Support 2021 – <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/x4jdvxpl/es-supporting-staff-well-being-in-he-report.pdf>