

ILO-UNESCO Joint Committee report on UCU allegations on academic freedom

In February 2019, UCU submitted an **allegation to the ILO/UNESCO joint committee** regarding the UK's non-compliance with the **1997 UNESCO recommendation concerning the status of higher education teaching personnel**. The UCU allegation focused on inadequate protections for academic freedom (both in law and in practice).

In February 2022, the Joint ILO–UNESCO Committee of Experts (CEART) published their **report** on the UCU allegations.¹ **UCU has welcomed** the report's findings and recommendations, particularly the strong sections on the relationship between job security and academic freedom.

This UCU briefing paper summarises the key sections in the CEART report, including important recommendations on issues such as university governance and quality assurance.

Job security and academic freedom

UCU's allegation highlighted how the abolition of tenure and the growth of casualised employment has undermined one of the essential safeguards for academic freedom in higher education.

The CEART report recognises that changes in employment relationships that diminish employment security are likely to weaken 'the full exercise of academic freedom and therefore one of the fundamental pillars of excellence in teaching and research.' It calls on the UK government to address growing employment insecurity among higher education staff by 'ensuring participation of organizations representing teaching personnel in the design of accountability and research frameworks' and by 'enhancing policy measures that safeguard tenure or its functional equivalent'.

The report also urges 'the Government to establish policies to improve institutional environments and the well-being of higher-education teaching personnel, including protection against harassment, intimidation and violence'.

¹ The section on the UCU allegation can be found on pages 26-34:

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_837723.pdf

University governance and staff participation

UCU's allegation highlighted the ways in which staff participation in university governance and academic bodies has been weakened in recent years, thus undermining another essential safeguard for academic freedom. In our submission we emphasised the improvements in collegial governance that have occurred in Scotland since the passing of the 2016 Higher Education Governance Act.

In response, the CEART report 'expresses concern that some universities in the United Kingdom do not have representation of teaching staff in their governance and academic bodies in line with paragraph 31 of the 1997 Recommendation, and welcomes the efforts made in Scotland to ensure adequate representation of teaching personnel in such bodies.' It urges the UK government and HE employers 'to ensure adequate representation of higher-education teaching personnel in governance and academic bodies', including being 'informed by best practices within the United Kingdom and in other countries'.

Quality assurance and 'accountability mechanisms'

UCU's allegation highlighted how controversial policies such as the Prevent Duty and HE 'accountability mechanisms' such as the Research Excellence Framework have resulted in greater control, management and regulation of academic work.

The CEART report recognises that 'the various quality assurance mechanisms established in recent years appear to present some vulnerabilities to both political interference and deference to market-driven priorities'. The authors point out that the 'defence against extremism and the search for 'value for money' need to be balanced with the need to preserve the right of higher-education teaching personnel to carry out teaching and research 'without constriction by prescribed doctrine' (1997 Recommendation, paragraph 27).'

It, therefore, calls on the UK government and social partners to engage in 'effective social dialogue, including joint research and sharing of information, consultation, and, as appropriate, collective bargaining' on issues such as the implementation of the Prevent Duty and on quality assurance mechanisms.

Next steps

On the back of the CEART report, UCU has written to the Department for Education calling for meaningful discussions on its findings and recommendations.

UCU branches may wish to refer to the CEART report as part of negotiations with management on policies and procedures relating to academic freedom, university governance, job security and quality assurance.

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