

Organising for equality

This quick guide for equality officers has been designed to complement UCU training, which you are strongly urged to attend. Details of UCU courses can be found on the training pages of the website in the UCU Activists section, or contact the Equality Unit on eqadmin@ucu.org.uk or your regional office.

The role of the equality officer

Branches/LAs that have a high membership density and high level of activity tend to have better working conditions. They also tend to be more pro-active in campaigning for improvements, rather than having to react to threats from the employer. In order for the membership to remain active, involved and informed, a branch/LA needs to elect representatives to take on different roles.

On the UCU model rules, rule 8.1 states that: 'Members will be elected to the following officer roles within the branch/LA: chair/president, vice-chair/vice-president, treasurer, secretary, membership secretary, equality officer.'

Section 8.6 in the model rules describes the role of the equality officer:

8.6 Equality officer

The equality officer will:

- 8.6.1 have knowledge of and commitment to relevant issues, and be willing to undertake training according to the needs of UCU, monitor the implementation of equality policies within the institution, and, where appropriate, encourage and support local negotiations on equality matters
- 8.6.2 monitor the volume and nature of personal casework which involves equality issues to ensure that the branch/LA has appropriate mechanisms in place for handling such cases
- 8.6.3 where appropriate, provide information, encouragement and support to members about equality issues
- 8.6.4 ensure that UCU's national annual meetings, and any other relevant events and opportunities for women, black members, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members and disabled members are publicised locally, that members from all groups are encouraged to participate, and that the branch/LA maximises the opportunities for recruitment and organisation amongst all groups

8.6.5 where appropriate, provide liaison between the branch/LA and UCU's equality structures

In the absence of the equality officer, these duties will be performed by another officer or officers as the committee decides.

The role of the equality officer can vary according to the size and make up of the branch/LA. The model branch/LA plan (below) gives suggested plan a branch/LA can use. Not all the duties are exclusively those of the equality representatives; in fact you probably won't have the time to undertake them all, so your branch/LA committee should agree the areas of priority.

Equality committees

It is vital UCU has representatives on the institution's equality committee. Almost every college/university now has an equality committee or forum.

With changes coming to disability law, colleges and universities will be obliged to establish disabled staff groups. Other groups including ones for women and black staff may also be in existence. These groups may have some relationship with the equality committee.

UCU reps on a college equality committee should consult regularly with relevant groups of UCU members, and should always report back to the branch/LA at each meeting.

Other committees

In addition to the equality committee in the institution a branch/LA equality officer may want to consider sitting on committees such as curriculum or career development, and student support

Representing members

It is a branch/LA decision who undertakes representation of individual members as this will depend on levels of experience, training, and size of branch/LA. The branch/LA committee may invite the equality officer to act as an advisor to other representatives, or to take on some cases themselves.

Branch/LA organisation

Model branch/LA plan

What should branches/LAs be doing? Here is a ten-point plan:

- 1** Ensure there is an equality committee in the college or university.

- 2** Ensure that there is a UCU representative on this committee.
- 3** Have an equality officer on the branch/LA committee, and get it established that she or he has the right to time off for relevant training.
- 4** Make sure that your college or university has adopted the nationally agreed policies. A full listing of agreements can be found on the UCU website (www.ucu.org.uk/1689).
- 5** Once adopted, negotiate on their proper implementation. For example:
 - Is monitoring being done, and targets set for improvement?
 - Is equality impact assessment being undertaken?
 - Is an equal pay review being undertaken?
- 6** Use the national pay agreements in both sectors as a vehicle in the campaign to get parity for hourly-paid lecturers.
- 7** Ensure that training is provided in working time for all your members to meet their responsibilities not to discriminate against students on the grounds of sex, race, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief 9age to come in 20060 and to implement the positive equality duties for race, disability and gender.
- 8** Make equality issues a standing agenda item at branch/LA meetings.
- 9** Ensure you have copies of all UCU's equality publications, and keep up-to-date with Equality News, sent every two months to branch/LA secretaries and branch/LA equality officers.
- 10** Make sure all your communications with members are accessible, friendly and welcoming to all.

Branch/LA meetings

It's a sad fact that sometimes branch/LA meetings will not be very well attended. There are many reasons - time, distance to travel, pressures of work etc. But sometimes it's because the meetings do not take into consideration all members' needs. Below is a checklist to help with meeting members' needs:

- Ask the members whether they have any specific requirements for meetings.
- Advertise the meeting as much in advance as possible and ensure the information is provided in all formats and if needed book a British Sign Language Interpreter.
- Ensure the room is accessible for all members.

- Consider the most convenient times for members to attend. For example, late night meetings may disenfranchise members with childcare needs etc, or specific times may be difficult for those to whom religious observance is vital at particular points in the week.
- If the branch/LA is located in more than one workplace, try and rotate the locations of the meetings.
- Ensure the meeting ends at the advertised time.
- Don't use union jargon.
- Find out if any members need childcare and discuss what the union can do to help – for example by planning a babysitting rota or having a crèche in a room near the meeting.

This is not an exhaustive list. Your best course of action is to ask.

Branch/LA communications

One of the most important things a branch/LA should do to maintain involvement from members is to keep them informed. With ever increasing pressures of work this can be overlooked. Information can sometimes be sent out in a way that doesn't meet a member's needs.

Below is a checklist for branches/LAs to consider when communicating with members.

- Ask members what is the best method of communication for them.
- Remember that not all members have access to emails or the web eg hourly-paid workers often do not have access to the intranet system.
- Provide information in all formats requested by members eg large print, braille.
- Try to use simple language and avoid jargon.
- If you are providing a British Sign Language interpreter remember a national shortage means you will need to book them well in advance.
- In terms of who pays for the interpreter please contact the regional office for advice. If the meeting relates to grievance or discipline the employer should pay.

This is not an exhaustive list. Your best course of action is to ask.

Recruitment and organisation

For a branch/LA to remain well organised it needs to keep members informed and involved. It also needs to continually recruit new members and have an active branch/LA committee made up of representatives from all areas within the workplace. UCU runs courses specifically around recruitment and organisation. But below are a few items you may want to consider, if you haven't already had this training.

- Does the membership fairly reflect the composition of the workforce?
- Are there any curriculum areas with particularly low membership?
- Does the branch/LA committee fairly reflect the composition of the branch/LA, in terms of race, gender etc?
- Does the branch/LA campaign for improvements to working conditions as well as defend existing ones?

If the answer is no to any of the bullet points, your branch/LA should review its strategies for recruiting members and reps.

Member networks

The equality unit runs email lists for black members, disabled members, LGBT members and women members. If you want to be added to one, email eqadmin@ucu.org.uk.