University and College Union

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To	Branch and local association secretaries
Topic	**PGRs as Staff Campaign**
Action	Annual HE sector conference will be asked to note the report on the PGRs as Staff Campaign and accept its recommendations
Summary	A report on the progress of the PGRs as Staff Campaign together with recommendations for HE sector conference
Contact	Alex Kirby-Reynolds (akirbyreynolds@ucu.org.uk) and Ellie Munro (emunro@ucu.org.uk), Postgraduate Researcher as Staff Campaign Leads

Dear Colleague

This paper reports on the progress of the PGRs as Staff Campaign.

It provides (a) information on the background to this work, (b) details of key progress made across different work areas, (c) a description of learning and expectations regarding the future of the campaign, and (d) a consideration of how the project might be expanded.

HE Sector conference will be asked to note the report on the PGRs as Staff Campaign and approves the report's recommendations.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jo Grady

General secretary

1   Background to the PGRs as Staff Campaign

1.1   In 2020, SHESC passed motion HE11, which recognises the research work of PGRs as labour and commits UCU to campaign for PGRs to be recognised as members of staff.

1.2   In learning from an equivalent campaign, which took members of our Swedish sister union (SULF) 50 years to win, it was recognised that the campaign's ultimate aims would take a significant length of time to achieve and would involve putting pressure on universities, and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

1.3   In Spring 2021, PGR members, supported by Jane Thompson (BNO), drafted the campaign's manifesto, which outlines principles that universities should adopt in

the short-to-medium term: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11623/Postgraduate-researchers-as-staff-manfesto-2021/pdf/UCU-PGRs_as_staff_manifesto_Jun21.pdf

1.4   In October 2021, UCU hired Ellie Munro and Alex Kirby-Reynolds for the position of campaign co-leads, on a job share basis.

1.5   Once active in post, the campaign leads agreed a campaign strategy that included lobbying, bargaining and negotiating, organising, and communications work.

1.6   The initial theory of change, from which this strategy was developed, is available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1W3Xzijbmko4DaeH7-Rm1bZjp2rv041pc/view?usp=share_link

1.7   The campaign lead position is currently funded for a fixed-term of 22-months, with the expectation that the holders will produce this report for Congress 2023, with accompanying recommendations as to the future of the campaign.

2   Campaign Progress

2.1   Work on the campaign was split into two phases across the 22 months of the project.

2.2   The full review of Phase 1 is available here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1l71CrsSe-h0iA101W0c54Mw2g_mw6E9w_h12P4VsGI0/edit?usp=sharing.

2.3   The review of Phase 2 will be conducted as the project ends its second year.

2.4   This section details key metrics and indicators from the campaign, to date, in relation to: (1) lobbying, (2) bargaining and negotiating, (3) organising, and (4) communications.

2.5   <u>Lobbying</u>

2.5.1   A positive early relationship was developed with the relevant UKRI directors and officials, with initial meetings indicating that there was a significant degree of overlap in terms of the respective aims of UCU and UKRI.

2.5.2   This overlap was partially evidenced by the actions of former UKRI Director of Talent, Rory Duncan, who, upon moving to Sheffield Hallam, matched their internal PhD stipend rate to the real living wage and increased the minimum funding period from 3 up to 3.5 years.

2.5.3   UKRI subsequently launched a consultation on the BEIS 'New Deal for Postgraduate Researcher' in February 2022.

2.5.4   More than 950 survey respondents and 15 focus group participants were recruited for the research to produce UCU's response to the consultation.

2.5.5   The resultant 140-page report, *Getting a Better Deal for PGRs*, was the longest

and most detailed that UKRI received. A summary version can be found here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/133T8_9rtJSK88cqd3KfrB45Vc08J2wjs/view?usp =share_link

2.5.6 UKRI's response to the consultation submissions is expected imminently and they have recently committed to discussing how UCU's recommendations can be taken forward - especially with respect to the issues of stipends and diversity, equality, and inclusion.

2.5.7 Further lobbying opportunities through UKRI have been opened up as a result of the funders' desire to align rights and conditions across all groups of researchers that they fund.

2.5.8 Other lobbying opportunities include collaborative research with the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE), whose director, having attended the UCU PGRs Organising 2023 Conference, expressed the view that PGRs in the UK having 'staff status' seems far more feasible than they had previously believed.

2.5.9 A response to the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Students consultation on the Cost of Living Crisis is currently underway, with UCU's survey having received just under 900 PGR respondents.

2.6 <u>Bargaining and Negotiating</u>

2.6.1 Campaign briefings and/or introductory meetings in relation to local activities have been held with PGR members and/or relevant officers from the following 33 UCU branches:

Aberdeen	Edinburgh	Newcastle	St Andrews
Aston	Exeter	Open University	Surrey
Birmingham	Glasgow	Oxford	Sussex
Bristol	Goldsmiths	QUB	UCL
Cambridge	KCL	QMUL	Ulster
Cardiff	Keele	Sheffield	Warwick
City, University of London	Leeds	Sheffield Hallam	
Coventry	Liverpool	SOAS	
Durham	Manchester	Southampton	

2.6.2 At least basic support has been provided to PGR members and/or relevant

officers from the following 19 branches for the purposes of setting up or developing dedicated local PGR-focused campaign efforts and groups:

Aberdeen	Durham	QMUL	Sussex
Bristol	KCL	Sheffield	Surrey
Cambridge	Keele	Sheffield Hallam	Ulster
Cardiff	Newcastle	SOAS	Warwick
Coventry	Oxford	St Andrews	

2.6.3　PGRs from the following 14 branches have received support to develop or negotiate claims and other comparable demands:

Bristol	KCL	Oxford	Sussex
Cambridge	Keele	Sheffield	Surrey
Cardiff	Manchester	Sheffield Hallam	
Durham	Newcastle	St Andrews	

2.6.4　Bargaining and negotiating support has been most closely provided to relevant officers from Durham, Newcastle, Sheffield, and Sussex, all of whom secured agreements to negotiate with their employers on local conditions through the 2021 Marking and Assessment Boycott.

2.6.5　Other PGR campaign efforts and wins have also taken place across a number of universities, including: a campaign for better conditions for PGRs at the University of Bath, the passing of a Student Union motion in support of PGRs as Staff at the University of Birmingham, and the moving of all Associate Lecturers at Sheffield Hallam from zero-hour to fractional contracts.

2.6.6　A range of tools and support practices have also been developed to help PGR members and local branches assess their needs, organise, and develop claims. These should form the basis for the future development of a suite of resources for PGRs.

2.6.7　Included here is: (a) a campaign workbook for supporting members through the full duration of a campaign, (b) a GTA contract self-assessment tool to identify local issues and opportunities, and (c) templates for self-delivered branch organising training.

2.6.8　Efforts are also currently underway with members to collaboratively develop a

casualised teaching contract database in order to aid branch negotiations.

2.7   Organising

2.7.1   The initial strategy to facilitate PGR organising was premised on the idea of providing members with substantial ongoing training to develop local claims and accompanying campaigns.

2.7.2   Although claims and demands around the employment of PGRs have been submitted and/or successfully negotiated across a number of branches, most PGR members and officers have had insufficient capacity to get to the point at which local training would be well attended or beneficial.

2.7.3   Despite these early limitations, successful training of PGR members was conducted via a cohort for Organizing for Power 2022, with this being the largest and most active regional or national UCU group that was recruited.

2.7.4   Some of this cohort went on to become effective leaders of local or national campaigning described elsewhere in this section.

2.7.5   Experiences of providing ongoing support to these members and learning from the practices of other education unions allowed a consistent and effective approach to supporting organising to be developed, which is described in the subsequent section.

2.7.6   Most notably, this approach was utilised to support PGRs Against Low Pay campaigners in their successful efforts at securing a 13% increase in the PGR stipend for UKRI Research Council-funded PGRs.

2.7.7   This win amounted to around £48 million and significantly more was then secured when the majority of universities and other funders were pressured into matching this raise.

2.7.8   This national member-led campaign has had a significant positive effect on changing PGRs expectations regarding trade union involvement and the need for member-led organising.

2.7.9   It has also resulted in the commencement of local UCU campaigning focused on 'pay and conditions' for postgraduate research work.

2.7.10 The most significant example of these developments is provided by the successful boycott of casual teaching work undertaken by PGR members at the University of Bristol in relation to demands around PGR stipends and other financial support.

2.7.11 The organisers achieved a participation rate of 90% and have subsequently been facilitated to share their experiences with PGRs at other branches who are building towards similar action.

2.8   Communications

2.8.1   The @UCUPostgrads Twitter account has amassed over 3500 followers in under 14 months. It provides an effective platform for advertising events and

initiatives to PGR members and also offers a direct means of communicating with those wishing to begin campaigning.

2.8.2 The establishment of a UK-wide PGR organising group chat of over 300+ PGR members, supplementary action-specific groups, and additional groups for disabled PGRs and PGRs with caring responsibilities, all provide similar opportunities.

2.8.3 Most effectively, these communication channels were used alongside official ones to fill all 50 in-person places for the hybrid PGRs Organising 2023 Conference within 48hrs, and attract another 170 members online registrations.

2.8.4 The conference provided a space in which PGR members were able to run and take part in workshops, discuss issues of equity in relation to a reimagined PhD system, share experiences of local organising, and build ideas for future UCU policy.

2.8.5 Workshops and panel discussions were led by Black and South Asian PGRs, disabled PGRs, PGRs with caring responsibilities, working-class PGRs, migrant PGRs and self-funded PGRs, among others.

2.8.6 The full conference programme can be viewed here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fmcFRBXoREyTtiWfrpjs7fJNAo_T-v6F/edit?usp=share_link&ouid=105756040969679872534&rtpof=true&sd=true

2.8.7 Campaign media coverage has been obtained through leveraging relationships that have been established with journalists, especially those from Times Higher Education and Research Fortnight.

2.8.8 This has resulted in regular quotes being provided from the campaign leads and contributions from PGR members being facilitated with Research Fortnight and Sky News.

3   The Future of the Campaign

3.1   This section describes key lessons that have been learned within the campaign and how these may continue to be successfully built upon.

3.2   <u>Learning</u>

3.2.1 The above work to support members has enabled the following interrelated factors, which limit PGR organising, to be identified:

- PGRs are often only active for short periods of time before leaving their institution - typically in their 3rd or 4th year when other demands are greatest.

- PGRs often face barriers to expanding their personal local networks, especially among other groups of workers.

- There can be significant turnover of, or vacancies within, relevant branch officer positions.

- PGR officers may face difficulties in accessing facility time.

- PGRs often have limited confidence, experience, and knowledge in relation to traditional trade union activities and structures.

- PGRs often perceive that they or their issues are not taken seriously by more senior colleagues or their UCU branch.

- PGRs often perceive that many of the activities of their branch and UCU union nationally lack relevance for them.

- There is often limited capacity within UCU branches and offices to provide specific support to PGR members, who themselves are often unaware of what would benefit them.

3.2.2 Taken in various combinations, these factors entail that PGRs may be classified as early career members who are both 'hyper-casualised' within the sector and 'hard-to-reach' under traditional models of trade unionism.

3.2.3 This assessment is further supported when observing the forms of organising that PGR members and non-members often feel most comfortable undertaking in parallel or outside of formal branch structures.

3.2.4 This organising exhibits some or all of the following characteristics:

- Having a relatively non-hierarchical structure, such that anyone can take on informal leadership roles.

- Being predominantly composed of loose or weak associations between activists.

- Being geographically distributed across regions.

- Being time-limited and/or frequently dependent on unsustainable efforts.

- Being issue-based.

3.2.5 As well as being a response to the limiting factors initially listed, such campaigning also has parallels with other forms of contemporary organising that PGRs may be familiar with - such as that undertaken within community organising or tenants unions.

3.2.6 To develop an effective means of supporting these different forms of PGR organising through the campaign, a professionalised approach and set of practices were developed.

3.2.7 The approach is based upon the establishment and development of mentoring relationships with emergent leaders and clear, ongoing communication regarding goals, expectations, and capacities.

3.2.8 The practices is structured around the '4 C's Campaign Model', which is comprised of:

1. Initial **contact** with members

2. Forming a member organising **committee**

3. Establishing a strategic **campaign** plan

4. Launching public action and submitting a **claim** (or equivalent)

3.2.9 This model was created through discussions with PGR members, and senior organisers from the National Education Union (NEU) and the Communication Workers of America - Graduate Student Employees Union (CWA-GSEU).

3.2.10 Providing support through an ongoing relationship and helping members work towards incremental goals that seek to build capacity has proved effective and versatile.

3.2.11 Most importantly, this approach allows substantial scope for overcoming different challenges by ensuring that members have an enduring space in which they can discuss their needs and objectives alongside what is required of them and available support.

3.3   Opportunities and Risks

3.3.1 As detailed in this and the previous section of the report, significant progress has been made within the PGRs as Staff Campaign, in a short period of time.

3.3.2 Through the development of relationships, practices, and resources, PGR members have been supported to secure vital wins and, in turn, create an expectation within PGR networks that they should lead campaign efforts and be supported in doing so.

3.3.3 Providing adequate organising support to PGR members is time and labour intensive, however, and this entails that there are limits to the current scope of delivery.

3.3.4 Despite these limits, if maintaining current levels of resourcing in the PGRs as Staff Campaign, UCU can comfortably expect to take advantage of opportunities to:

o   Refine and modernise its core organising support practices.

o   Develop and support PGR leaders to obtain important wins.

o   Positively shape the emergent UKRI 'New Deal for Postgraduate Researchers'.

o   Expand PGR membership numbers and, resultantly, increase the revenue obtained from dues.

o   Facilitate the further expansion of networks of PGR members and organisers.

o   Foster a culture of organising among those who will go on to be the future of the membership and workforce.

o   Increase participation in UCU's formal branch and national structures.

3.3.5 If current levels of resourcing are not maintained, however, then there may be some interrelated risks that stem from a lack of dedicated capacity and those limiting factors identified previously.

3.3.6 These risks are that:

- o Key opportunities regarding the 'New Deal for Postgraduate Researchers' and supporting emergent campaigning around stipends and fees may be lost.

- o PGR members may perceive that they are not sufficiently valued.

- o PGR activity levels and/or membership numbers within UCU may decline.

- o Existing and future tensions between PGR members and their branches may go without external mediation or redirection towards productive campaign efforts.

- o Broader learning and development opportunities for UCU as a trade union, as listed above, may not be realised.

3.4 On the basis of these expected opportunities and risks, and progress made so far, it is recommended that UCU should continue resourcing the campaign and consider whether further benefits could be obtained through modestly increasing capacity.

4 Project Expansion

4.1 Much of the progress made in the PGRs as Staff campaign has been dependent on the ability to successfully navigate or overcome those factors which limit organising capacity, as identified in the previous section, through focused ongoing work.

4.2 PGRs aren't the only group of UCU members that these factors apply to, however, or who may be considered 'early career', 'hyper-casualised' and/or 'hard-to-reach'.

4.3 Other groups of members who may be classified as such, include:

- o Early Career Researchers

- o Academic-Related and Professional Services

- o Learning Support Assistants

- o Those working in Adult and Community Education

- o Those working in Outsourced Education Providers

- o Those working in Prison Education

4.4 There are significant amounts of policy, campaigns, and appetite for action among these groups and their elected representatives on the Anti-Casualisation Committee.

4.5 A lack of member organising power and capacity to provide support to campaigning in the face of structural barriers, however, is likely a factor which limits UCU's ability to obtain improvements.

4.6 Providing adequate, structured organising support to these groups, alongside

dedicated bargaining and negotiating, lobbying and communications work, would likely enable members to secure increased wins within existing and future democratically established campaigns.

4.7   We have worked closely with the UCU Anti-Casualisation Lead and Secretary to the ACC, Jane Thompson, throughout the project. She endorses the opportunities and risks that we have identified in parts 3 and 4 of this report.

4.8   As such, given the likely advantages for UCU in expanding the approach developed through the PGRs as Staff Campaign to other groups of members, it is recommended that UCU consider where and how this could be applied to greatest effect.

5   Recommendations

The HESC notes this report and accepts the two recommendations in this report (3.4 and 4.8).