

7 December 2018

University and College Union

Meeting of Democracy commission

Location UCU, Carlow Street Head Office

Date 25 October 2018

Confirmed minutes

Present Caitlin Adams, Alan Barker, Vicky Blake, Cecily Blyther, Alison Chapman, Martin Chivers, Rachel Cohen, Nina Doran, Jeff Fowler, Ann Gow, Brian Hamilton, Martha Harris, Jane Harvey, Elane Heffernan, Margot Hill, John Hogan, Pat Hornby Atkinson, Kerry Lemon, Lesley McGorrigan, Rachel Minshull, Sam Morecroft, Denis A Nicole, Christina Paine, Nita Sanghera (vice president), Keith Simpson, Sean Wallis, Saira Weiner, Justin Wynne

In attendance Paul Cottrell (National head of democratic services and acting general secretary), Catherine Wilkinson (Head of constitution and committees), Kay Metcalfe (minute taker)

Nita Sanghera, vice president, opened the meeting.

1 Apologies for absence

1.1 Apologies were received from Mark Abel, Douglas Chalmers, Jacqueline D'arcy, Lindesay Dawe, Geraint Evans, John James, Chris Jones, Kirsty Keywood, Rhiannon Lockley and Jess Meacham.

2 Election of chair

2.1 Nominations to the chair were sought. The commission voted in favour of co-chairing as an acceptable arrangement. Vicky Blake and Elane Heffernan were elected unopposed as co-chairs of the commission.

3 Remit of the commission (paper DC/02)

Vicky Blake was in the chair.

3.1 The commission had before it the motions passed by the May 2018 meeting of Congress, relevant to its remit. Motion 51 from the one-day Congress held on 18 October 2018 was subsequently circulated.

3.2 The breadth of the remit was noted. The suggestion to break into groups was

made. There was a general discussion in relation to remit, including the background in the USS dispute and the wider issue of accountability. A paper under the heading of remit from Rhiannon Lockley on behalf of the women members' standing committee was tabled (DC/05).

- 3.3 Sam Morecroft gave an explanation of the background to the Congress motion which established the commission (motion B19), and was based in the events of the USS dispute.
- 3.4 Co-chair Elane Heffernan summarised some points from the discussion noting:
 - accountability
 - election turnout
 - understanding of how the USS dispute action was called off
 - composition of Congress
 - not knowing/understanding processes within the union
 - communication between members and NEC
- 3.5 There was further general discussion of remit, including communication, accountability, and definitions of democracy. It was noted that the ability to 'recall' elected representatives was specifically referred to in motion B19.
- 3.6 The relevance of the relationship between elected representatives and paid officials was noted, as was the role of the general secretary's office.
- 3.7 Consultation with equality groups, and consideration of devolved nation perspectives, were raised.
- 3.8 Co-chair Vicky Blake invited the commission to break into five groups, noting that key areas for discussion included:
 - decision making and accountability
 - democratic structure
 - additional structures/mechanisms
 - participation and representation
 - equality safeguards
 - consultation methodology
 - transparency and communication.

4 Reports back from group discussions

Elane Heffernan was in the chair.

- 4.1 Each group reported back on their discussions. Points included:
 - i. The role of paid officials; their relationship with the NEC and with regional committees

- ii. The role of the presidential team, and the general secretary and their relationships with NEC; the lack of any role descriptions for the presidential team
- iii. The variation in the role and function of regions; a strong, well-attended regional committee improves input into NEC
- iv. The structure of NEC meetings; should there be discussion papers at NEC?
- v. Disconnect between the NEC and the wider membership
- vi. The process for NEC members voting at Congress
- vii. The role of the NEC; how policy is or should be made
- viii. How technology can be used to increase member involvement (eg Skype meetings)
- ix. Voting rights – the pre- and post-92 division and the USS dispute
- x. The creation of forums or spaces for membership to interact
- xi. The tension of members doing unpaid work for the union
- xii. More induction for new UCU members including on UCU structures
- xiii. Activists and members – useful to distinguish or not?
- xiv. The function of strike committees
- xv. How structures work for the equality committees
- xvi. The expectation that regionally elected NEC members should be attending their regional committees
- xvii. Clarification on the accountability of the general secretary to Congress
- xviii. Differences in the way different committees work, including different relationships with paid staff
- xix. The possibility of consulting paid staff about their views
- xx. Tension between what comes from Congress and sector conferences and what comes from regions
- xxi. How communication works between committees

4.2 The commission further noted:

- Some issues needed consultation before further work; others needed further work, then consultation.
- Lots of paperwork had been provided in the information folder which commission members needed time to look at.
- Not all commission members were present.

4.3 Further general discussion around the commission's programme of work and

timescale for work continued. The creation of working groups and their remits were further discussed and revisited throughout the meeting. No working groups were established at the meeting; the option of creating groups at the next meeting was noted.

- 4.4 Issues relating to the general secretary and the possibility of a deputy general secretary (DGS) role were raised. The commission subsequently agreed that there were no issues, such as the election of a DGS, on which a consensus could be assumed.
- 4.5 The key themes emerging from the discussions including the group feedback were noted on a flipchart which would be captured and circulated.
- 4.6 Vicky Blake, co-chair, summarised and sought decisions on a number of proposals that had arisen during discussion.
- 4.7 There was broad agreement that there should be an email discussion list for the commission, the primary purpose of which would be to circulate papers and ask questions about the commission's process, rather than to debate the commission's issues. Some members emphasised that the decisions should be made in the commission's meetings.
- 4.8 The commission AGREED that members could start writing papers, together or individually, and establish formal working group at the next meeting. A shared (on-line) space for making papers available amongst commission members, for collaborative comment, was proposed, and would be explored.
- 4.9 The commission AGREED that its meetings should take place on Fridays, and a Friday in December and one in January were proposed.
- 4.10 The commission AGREED that reports on its meetings should be made available on UCU's website.
- 4.11 The commission AGREED that commission members should go into branches and regional committee meetings, preferably in pairs, though it was noted that it was first necessary to identify what the commission wanted to ask branches. Other groups were identified that the commission would wish to ask questions of including past presidents, the general secretary, NEC members, staff.
- 4.12 During the wide ranging discussion, the content of the motion was re-stated: it referred specifically to inter-election mechanisms and the ability to hold elected representatives to account, as well as to 'democratic structures'. The commission NOTED that it should produce a report, which, in addition to its recommendations, could also list further work that might improve aspects of the union's functions but which the commission had not dealt with, and include further elections if required.
- 4.13 The commission discussed the issue of 'expert' advice. The possibility of a requesting a report, prepared externally, on other unions' structures was discussed. It was noted that other unions' rules were generally available on line, and that the structures and rules themselves did not provide information about

how well they worked. An external report would also raise issues of timescale. There was no agreement that an external report should be sought.

- 4.14 The commission AGREED that a call should be made to fill the two regional vacancies on the commission, by a process similar to that for filling the academic-related vacancy.
- 4.15 There was some discussion of the UCU structure chart included in the information folder. It was noted that the structure was complicated and there was no easy way to show all the information; some members thought the chart was useful.
- 4.16 Questions of the resources available to the commission were raised, for example, using web pages. Paul Cottrell undertook to take away requests from the commission so he could then explore whether resources could be made available.
- 4.17 The possibility of scheduling the special Congress immediately after or during the scheduled annual meeting of Congress in May 2019 was raised. No final decision on the reporting timetable was made but it was AGREED that the venue's availability should be ascertained.

5 Any other business

- 5.1 A request was made for membership information in respect of HE, FE and other constituencies within UCU.