

**2023 National Higher Education Conference  
Decisions**

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## 2023 National Higher Education Conference Decisions

### Motions

#### 1. One-off Payment for University Staff

**Carried**

The primary role of UNISON, or any Trade Union, is to use the collective power of its members to deliver lasting and significant improvements to pay, pension rights and working conditions.

We cannot help but be mindful of, and worried for the health and wellbeing of our members in HE, facing as they have been for the last three years truly unprecedented challenges: the pandemic – which left many colleagues forced to work from home, in often less than ideal situations, or conversely required that other colleagues go onto campuses in what was manifestly an unsafe time to be out in public; the so-called ‘cost of living crisis’, including massive hikes in utility bills; year upon year of below inflation pay rises.

Yet, while staff are facing ever more difficult choices about which essentials to cut back on, the sector they work in has never been richer: this is not about the failure to make money, rather it is the choices made about the distribution of the wealth created.

Since the declaration of a pandemic and the rapid societal changes invoked by that, many employees in HE have worked from home, for a greater or lesser part of their working week: it is accepted that this number is slowly diminishing as the transfer back to campuses across the country is happening at a steady pace.

This meant that the cost of working – heating, lighting, broadband, as well as sundry office supplies and larger scale equipment – was moved from the employer to the thousands of individuals at kitchen tables and spare bedrooms across the country. At Leeds University, we know that the employer “saved” at least £22m in one year, on these costs, while at the same time refusing to make contributions to the increased bills faced by individuals: in short, a business cost was in part, transferred from the employer to the employee.

Acknowledging that some institutions have already moved to making payments along these lines, but clearly there has been no consistency in the amounts, the manner (vouchers or salary) or even the acceptance of the need. We look to gain acknowledgement and acceptance that it should not be up to thousands of individual staff members, many already struggling to meet daily living costs, to effectively subsidise the work of an increasingly wealthy sector.

Accepting the logistical impossibility of organising a system whereby individuals can invoice their own employer, we propose that UNISON Higher Education Service Group (HESGE) look to establish a one-off extraordinary negotiation with the employers to seek reparation, in the form of a one-off payment to each employee in the sector.

Conference calls on the Higher Education Service Group Executive to:

Meet with the employers, as early as possible outside of the normal pay negotiation cycle, with a view to negotiating a one-off, non-consolidated payment to all staff, to mitigate the extra financial impact that working from home has had on employees.

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### **2. National Freedom of Information Requests to Strengthen our Campaigns** **Carried**

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA) gives people the right to request information from universities. The Act aims to promote a culture of transparency and accountability, and therefore facilitate better understanding of how the universities carry out their duties, why they make the decisions they do, and how they spend public money and that obtained from student tuitions fees and other income sources.

In the past a FOI was served on a university to find out how much it had spent on a piece of artwork. It turned out to be £1.4 million! £1.4 million stuck on the wall when our members were refused pay to keep up and catch up.

In 2018 Channel 4's Dispatches programme showed that senior university managers had claimed almost £8 million in expenses over a two-year period.

Almost 200 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent to institutions around the UK revealed for the first time the claims made by vice-chancellors and their staff.

We should utilise the legislation of FOIs to continue to see how university money is being spent. By highlighting to our members how some universities have prioritised spending for vice chancellors and their executive it can strengthen our evidence in relation to support for cost living pay increases, and in resisting attacks on terms and conditions.

A university's purpose is to provide a quality service to students using their most valuable resource, our members, who deserve fair pay for the hard work they provide.

UNISON in Higher Education has a role, working with regions and supporting branches, in requesting FOI's from university employers as it will take the pressure off individual branches and any possible local reactions from the employers.

We therefore call on the Higher Education National Service Group Executive (HESGE) to:

- 1) Seek to serve FOI's on Universities, seeking information on bonuses, expenses, travel, private health care etc. when deemed appropriate by the HESGE.
- 2) Collate this information to use in national and local pay negotiations and campaigns.
- 3) Share this information with regions and branches to use in other campaigns on such issues, for example, as terms and conditions

### **3. Aggregate the ballot**

**Lost**

### **4. Higher Education, work/life balance, and the Right to Disconnect**

**Fell**

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### 5. Securing the legacy of the year of disabled workers in Higher Education workplaces

**Carried**

Conference notes the success of UNISON's Year of Disabled Workers 2022. Throughout the year we saw renewed focus on the experience of disabled members in our union, in the workplace and in society, including those in the Higher Education service group.

We used the year to highlight the important contribution our disabled members make to the union, to improve terms and conditions for disabled workers including in Higher Education workplaces, and to campaign for improved rights for all disabled workers.

Conference notes the letter sent to all service groups by General Secretary Christina McAnea which called on the Higher Education service group to get fully behind the initiative, including by making the year of disabled workers a standing item on service group executive agendas and encouraging regions and branches to do likewise.

Christina also called of the following actions from the Higher Education service group:

- 1) Encourage all Higher Education branches to elect a disabled members officer or contact and register them for national training.
- 2) Support branches to negotiate with their employer to agree reasonable adjustment passport and disability leave policies, based on UNISON's bargaining guides, and raise these at a national bargaining level where appropriate.
- 3) Work with and support regional and branch disabled members groups.

Conference welcomes the work that the Higher Education Service Group has undertaken to contribute to the success of the Year of Disabled Workers.

Conference acknowledges that tackling systemic and ingrained discrimination against disabled workers will take more than one year and we need to use the success of the year of disabled workers to continue our work and secure a lasting legacy for our members working in Higher Education.

Conference therefore resolves to ask the service group executive to work with the national disabled members committee to:

- a) Seek to carry out an audit of Higher Education branches to assess:
  - i) where there is no agreed reasonable adjustment passport or policy
  - ii) where there is no agreed paid disability leave policy
  - iii) where there is no elected disabled members officer

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- b) Implement a disability equality bargaining strategy for the service group to address these policy gaps using UNISON's two bargaining guides (Disability Leave guide and Reasonable Adjustments Policy and Passport guide) to negotiate locally.
- c) Publicise UNISON's now regular online Disabled Members Officers and Contacts training to Higher Education branches and consider setting a target for the number attending each year.
- d) Circulate UNISON's new Stewards Guide to Representing Disabled Members and our Guide to Representing Deaf (British Sign Language users) Members to activists in Higher Education branches and workplaces.

### **6. Make the Real Living Wage the Minimum for Requirements for Pay Agreements**

**Carried**

Conference believes that everyone deserves to be paid a real living wage.

We call upon the National Higher Education Service Group Executive to ensure that in the next round of The New Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES) negotiations a pay spine is proposed and promoted by UNISON representatives in which the lowest spine point is above the Real Living Wage rate and no spine points are reduced as a result.

### **7. Higher Education Pay 2023-4**

**Carried**

Higher education pay has fallen behind. Since 2009 our pay has lost around 28% of its value as a result of below inflation cost-of-living rises year on year. The extreme increase in prices during 2022 has brought this to a crisis point, and UNISON members working in Higher Education are facing real hardship as a result.

After three pay negotiating meetings in 2022 the University and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) made their final pay offer: a below-inflation pay rise of 3% for most Higher Education staff and between 9% and 3% for those on pay points 3 to 19. They didn't offer any more during the dispute process and imposed this pay increase on 1 August 2022.

With RPI inflation at 11.8% and our pay only increased by 3% this pay rise was a pay cut. The higher increases on the lower spinal points were partly being proposed to keep pay at legal rates, so were a lot less generous than they appeared.

Increasing numbers of UNISON members have been taking strike action for a pay rise that keeps up with inflation. With the cost-of-living crisis and greatly increased bills members simply can't afford to live on the money that the employers imposed. Whatever the outcome of this 2022-3 pay dispute, these price rises are not expected to stop any time soon and so we will still need to bargain for a significant pay rise in 2023-4. Conference believes UNISON should seek to restore the buying power of wages in Higher Education.

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Conference calls on the HESGE to negotiate with the joint trade unions in higher education and to produce a joint claim for the following:

A consolidated pay award of a flat rate of £4,000, in addition to whatever employers are legally required to pay to meet the government's minimum wage.

- 1) reform of the pay spine to reinstate differentials between spinal points at the lower end of the pay scale, with a view to achieving a minimum spinal column point of £15 per hour.
- 2) agreement that all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) become Foundation Living Wage employers, extended to all staff on campus.
- 3) equivalent increases in London Weighting and all other allowances negotiated nationally.
- 4) agreement with the HE employers to oversee the introduction of a maximum 35 hour working week in all HEIs.
- 5) a Scottish sub-committee of New Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (New JNCHES), as provided for in the New JNCHES Framework Agreement, with the main purpose of that sub-committee to be to deal with matters not currently being dealt with at the UK-wide New JNCHES.
- 6) joint employer and union action to eliminate the gender and ethnicity pay gaps, aiming for transparency and full sharing of data at both a national and local level and taking an intersectional approach to achieving pay equality for all staff.
- 7) a national agreement to reduce precarious employment in higher education seeking, as far as possible, for all staff to be employed on permanent contracts.
- 8) a national agreement to bring outsourced workers in higher education back into direct university employment.
- 9) a national agreement on hybrid/flexible working.

In addition, Conference calls on the higher education service group executive to do the following, alongside the national pay negotiations:

- a) In the event that the joint pay claim is not met by the employers, seek to escalate the pay campaign, with a clear plan, in conjunction with sister higher education trade unions. This may include lawful industrial action to strengthen the campaign in accordance with UNISON rules relating to industrial action.
- b) If the joint pay claim is not met in full by the employers for 2023/4, explore the option of a multi-year pay deal for 24/25 onwards with branches within the service group and the other sister trades unions in higher education.
- c) build a campaign for all universities to become accredited Foundation Living Wage employers reminding them of the moral and business case of why they should apply for Foundation Living Wage accreditation and demand that they do so.

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- d) work with regions, branches and sister trade unions to achieve a reduction in the gender and ethnicity pay gaps.
- e) work with branches to seek to negotiate an equivalent rise in all appropriate local allowances in all HEIs.

### 8. Higher Education Role Analysis (HERA)

**Carried**

Conference notes that it has been some years since HERA was introduced as the tool for role analysis in the majority of UK universities as part of the National Framework Agreement. As part of that many UNISON activists were trained and accredited as HERA Role Analysts to support members wishing to have their roles evaluated, remunerated fairly/correctly for work undertaken and often to assist in the correct scoring of new roles, in partnership with employers. Many members are now being called on to take on additional duties as staff are not replaced and it is important that these members are supported by reps who have the relevant knowledge to support them through the process and give them the confidence to ask for their role to be re-evaluated.

It is important that as activists retire or move on that we replenish and refresh our pool of analysts and reps with an understanding of HERA, in order that we are able to advise and support members on issues around their roles and regrading applications/appeals.

We call on the Higher Education Service Group Executive to undertake the following:

- 1) Carry out a survey of members of their experiences of using the HERA/other analysis schemes in their workplace.
- 2) Use the feedback from the survey to update and reissue UNISON's guidance around HERA and/or other role/analysis schemes in place in HE for Activists.
- 3) Provide training for activists to become Accredited Role Analysts in HERA/other analysis scheme.

### 9. Promote UNISON as the union for Higher Education Professional Support Staff

**Carried**

Higher Education professional support staff across the country provide a vital service to our universities and students by carrying out hugely varied roles across our Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), though too often this work is not given the recognition it deserves by employers.

UNISON has a brilliant membership benefits package. There are opportunities to promote Higher Education more visibly both internally and externally. UNISON have had success in focusing communications, training and other benefits on specific service groups or worker groups such as schools and health care. It's time to make clear UNISON is the union for Higher Education staff.



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Conference recognises the need for branded materials aimed specifically at Higher Education workers and targeted information about the benefits of being in UNISON for university staff, to assist our branches with recruitment and organising priorities.

A refresh of the UNISON web page for Higher Education would be welcomed by conference to make key information more accessible for existing and potential future UNISON members.

Conference calls on the Service Group Executive to:-

- 1) Work with national office to produce specific Higher Education focussed leaflets and materials;
- 2) Consider how best to update the Higher Education pages on the National Website;
- 3) Work with the Learning and Organising Service (LAOS) on producing specific Higher Education learning opportunities and;
- 4) Work with regions and branches to build a campaign to promote UNISON as the union for Higher Education professional support staff.

### 10. Conversion therapy - spread the word

**Carried**

Conversion therapy refers to the practise of attempting to change a person's sexuality or gender identity. There are many different techniques, both physical and mental, that can include talking therapies and prayer, but more extreme forms can include exorcism, physical violence such as electric shocks and testosterone injections. There is no reliable scientific evidence that the so-called therapy works and sexuality can be changed.

Every major political party in the United Kingdom (UK) pledged to ban the practice as part of their commitment to the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender plus (LGBT+) individuals during the 2019 general election. The Tory government at Westminster started a consultation on the practice which ended in January 2022.

In April 2022, the UK Government announced that it was entirely scrapping plans for a ban, then quickly backtracked and said elements of the ban would go ahead. The current plan is to ban conversion therapy aimed at changing a person's sexual orientation - but not their gender identity. In addition, the proposed law will protect under-18s. However, it won't apply to people over 18 if they've consented and haven't been coerced. This means that LGBT+ people attending higher education institutions are at risk of this abusive practice.

Coercion will be very difficult to define – is a chat with a friendly church leader, coercion? What about if it is accompanied by interventions from other family members? Or if someone gets taken to a camp to learn what a “normal life” is about? When does influencing end and coercion begin?

The backtracking on excluding trans people from the ban on conversion therapy caused a major backlash with 100 organisations calling the decision unacceptable

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and pulling out of the government's first LGBT+ international conference due to be held this summer. The conference was then cancelled.

A survey by the Ozanne Foundation found that among those that had undergone some form of conversion therapy:

- 1) 68.7% reported having suicidal thoughts
- 2) 59.8% experienced anxiety and depression, requiring medication
- 3) 41.3% experienced anxiety and depression, not requiring medication
- 4) 40.2% said they had self-harmed
- 5) 24.6% said they had suffered from eating disorders

As higher education staff, we need to be aware of these figures as part of safeguarding. We need to understand the harm this practice does and recognise signs of students who could be vulnerable. This is why awareness raising within our higher education institutions Higher Education Institution (HEI) is so vital.

Conference notes the adoption by 2022 National Delegate Conference of the motion "Trans equality – Louder and Prouder" which included a commitment that UNISON will continue to campaign for a ban on conversion therapy that covers all LGBT+ people.

It calls on the higher education service group executive to work with the national LGBT+ committee to:

- 1) Produce a factsheet containing facts about conversion therapy and UNISON's policy and circulate this widely within the higher education service group and UNISON members in universities.
- 2) Call for conversion therapy to be added to the safeguarding policies of all Higher Education Institutions

### **11. Trial the 4-day work week**

**Carried as Amended: 11.1**

Conference believes it is time that Universities actively participated in 4-day work week trials. Universities are centres of research and innovation and many want to be 'employers of choice' (employers that people actively want to work for). They are the perfect institutions to try new approaches to work. Findings suggest that a 4-day week enhances employee wellbeing whilst also improving productivity: a win for employees, and a win for employers. The 4-day week is a reduction in the standard working week for the same pay and benefits. It does not mean working the same hours over fewer days.

Conference notes that a recent UK trial led to 86% of companies that took part maintaining the four-day week policy after the trial ended. When done correctly, this approach to work is practical and effective.

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It also has a significant, positive environmental impact. Someone who usually works 5 days a week reduces their weekly commute by 20% - this is a big reduction in the carbon footprint of someone who drives or takes public transport to work. Sustainability is high on the agenda for Universities and UNISON, and this policy supports the goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030.

Additionally, there are obvious big cost savings for the Universities in terms of utilities and their estate, and for employees too. 4 Day Week, a group campaigning for a shorter working week, have found that a parent with two children working a 4-day work would save £3,232.40 on average per year.

Conference calls on the Higher Education Service Group Executive to:

- 1) Develop a campaign to encourage Universities to engage with existing 4-day work week trials
- 2) Encourage Universities to utilise their own academic experts and HR resources to launch their own 4-day work week trials in consultation with their recognised trade unions.
- 3) Work with other campus unions to ensure trials are launched and involve a diverse range of employees from all staff groups
- 4) Share the evidence from previous and current 4-day week trials as part of the annual national pay bargaining round.

### **12. Campaigning for Proper Funding for Higher Education as a Public Service Carried**

Universities are autonomous organisations, delivering higher education and research, with the freedom to manage their own finances, subject to regulation. Each institution is different, with a complex mix of income streams depending on the nature of the students it teaches, the quantity and perceived quality of research it conducts to drive research income, and the way in which each of the UK nations manages fees and funding grants.

The methodology by which universities are funded has evolved over the last few decades. The introduction of tuition fees, and the political desire to turn institutions into businesses, has had a profound effect on the financial stability of many institutions. This has been especially the case with the Covid pandemic and the current cost of living crisis, where inflation threatens to make university income worth a fraction of what it was pre-Covid. All universities are also affected by rapidly increasing prices, in particular, spiralling energy costs.

This has implications for jobs, pay, pensions and working conditions of our members, as well as threatening the academic future of a whole generation of students and potential students.

England

Tuition fees for UK students studying at English universities have been frozen at £9,250. This means that since the introduction of the £9,000 fee in 2012, fees have risen by a mere 2.8% over ten years, whilst the cost of living has risen by at least

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that every year (except 2020) and the current inflation rate is around 12%, with no real likelihood of coming down in the near future.

Whilst some universities have reacted by ambitious expansion plans and actively recruiting international students, now typically charged fees in excess of £20,000, this strategy is limited and only realistically available to a handful of institutions.

Many universities rely on full time undergraduate fees as their core funding and the failure of fees to keep up with inflation has steadily and now rapidly, meant that real-terms income has plummeted.

### Scotland

Scottish universities charge tuition fees to students from outside Scotland, so are affected to some extent by the lack of an inflationary increase in regulated fee levels. However, universities in Scotland are heavily dependent on the funding provided by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which in turn is largely provided by the Scottish Government.

Whilst SFC grants have increased in recent years, real-terms funding has not kept up with inflation, and with funding announced for higher and further education as remaining flat in cash terms until 2026-27, estimated to be a real-terms cut of 8% over the period, Scottish universities will need to grow student numbers and rely on reserves to be able to come close to current spending. In reality, Principals will try to hold back spending where possible.

### Wales

Welsh universities are funded through a tertiary commission which channels funding mainly from the Welsh Government. As with English institutions, tuition fees now make up with largest source of income.

For 2022-23, Welsh universities face a £60 million drop in funding, at a time when it is crucial for income to rise, and Welsh universities face a significant drop in the real value of fee income.

### Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Executive's Department for the Economy is responsible for funding universities in Northern Ireland. The system allocates grants to universities, which are partially to offset smaller fees charged to Northern Ireland domiciled students, in a similar system to that of Wales.

However, fee income and education contracts now make up the major source of funding and again, without a significant rise in the value of the fees charged, universities in Northern Ireland face funding issues similar to those across the rest of the UK.

### Conference Further Notes:

The cumulative effects of decades of tuition fees and marketisation has reinforced divisions between institutions, which we can see right across the UK sector. Larger,

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traditional universities in the top quarter or third of the league tables are able to grow international student numbers and benefit from lucrative research contracts, charitable donations and business interests. These institutions are clearly guilty of hoarding cash despite their workforces suffering real terms pay cuts for many years.

The other end of the scale sees newer universities which are struggling to maintain expenditure and seeking to make significant cuts to courses, buildings and services as a way of managing the financial pressures under which they find themselves. With no easy way to increase student numbers, in spite of massively expanded marketing costs and clearing operations, and unable to compete with those institutions which appear to offer better educational prospects and “experiences”, as judged by league tables and surveys, these institutions are genuinely concerned about the future, without being able to publicly say so.

The June 2022 Office for Students (OfS) report on financial sustainability (for English institutions only) reports that “the aggregate financial position...remains sound, at this time”, but forecasts sourced from institutions will always be optimistic, with plans to grow numbers and income well in excess of the available prospective students. The report recognises, however, that this does not “reflect the picture for individual providers where financial performance and strength vary significantly.”

It is true, as all trade unions have pointed out, that the sector as a whole is sitting on significant sums of money, and some universities have been pressured, with or without strike action, to pay non-consolidated bonuses to partially offset the 2021-22 pay freeze. Where this has been achieved through pressure and campaigning by UNISON branches, we congratulate those wins for our members.

All Vice-Chancellors and Principals will aim to get the most labour from their workforce at the smallest possible cost, but some are holding back real wages so as to be able to invest elsewhere, whilst others are looking to their finance directors, who are telling them that they just can't afford it without making compensating cuts. Financial planners, like trade unions, recognise that genuine increases to wages are won for current and future years. For the vast majority of universities, a 12.3% (RPI at the time of writing) pay increase for university staff, just to keep up with rising prices, will not be matched with similar income growth based on current expectations. Without fighting for it, unions will see university income fall significantly.

A struggling university facing year-on-year financial deficits will face breaching loan covenants and eventually, the real prospect of insolvency.

With the cost-of-living crisis affecting every individual, business and institution, many universities are going to struggle to avoid significant financial issues during 2023 and beyond. A government obsessed with further enriching the wealthy to “drive growth”, at the expense of the poor and public services is unlikely to step in to save struggling universities without massive pressure from those who depend on those services.

In all likelihood, any university close to insolvency would face forced merger or closure as managed by the OfS or devolved national government department. University trade unions have a duty to prevent this happening if we can. This means campaigning for decent wages for all university workers but linking that campaign to

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the need for all universities to be properly funded, ideally through taxation rather than tuition fees, and ideally managed by accountable and elected governing bodies.

Where university leaders claim that perfectly reasonable pay rises are unaffordable, that is that they have to impose massive real terms pay cuts on our members, we should demand significantly revised and agreed budgets and genuine action to campaign alongside trade unions, involving students and the wider community, for appropriate government funding.

Conference calls on the Higher Education Service Group Executive to:

- 1) Continue to campaign for all universities across the UK to pay their workforces properly and to be properly funded to do so.
- 2) Highlight the massive funds available to some institutions and excessive pay of Vice Chancellors and Principals, whilst also recognising that not all universities are in a strong financial position.
- 3) Oppose the marketisation of universities and the inevitable winners and losers it creates, and campaign for an integrated, cooperative higher education service with no wasteful and destructive competition for students.
- 4) Campaign for struggling universities to receive the funding required to stay afloat, to avoid the terrible effects of an institution failing, on jobs, students and the wider community.
- 5) Continue to campaign for free education and an end to all tuition fees for UK domiciled students, with universities funded from general taxation, as a public service.
- 6) Draw up a campaigning plan to assist branches which face the prospect of institutional collapse.