

**2024 National Higher Education Conference  
Decisions**

## **2024 National Higher Education Conference Decisions**

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## 2024 National Higher Education Conference Decisions

### Motions

#### 1. Time to Smash the Gender Pay Gap in Higher Education

**Carried as Amended: 1.1**

Despite the Equal Pay Act coming into force over 50 years ago, there remains a persistent gender pay gap on university campuses across the United Kingdom. According to the Times Higher Education (THE), the mean pay gap in Higher Education in 2020 – 2021 was 14.8% which was higher than the UK average of 11.3%. Of the 109 institutions reported in THE, 10 had mean hourly pay gaps at or above 20% and an additional 31 reported mean hourly pay gaps between 15% & 20%.

While there had been some progress made in narrowing the gap, that appears to have stalled despite initiatives such as Advance HE's Athena Swan Charter and Aurora leadership programme. The employers' body, UCEA (Universities & Colleges Employers Association), have shown little enthusiasm to actively engage in genuine partnership work through the New Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES) instead preferring to hide behind an excuse of a limited mandate and focusing instead on producing limited guidance for employers.

It is important that the gender pay gap is not considered in isolation and more must be done to fully understand the impact of multiple pay gaps. While work is at an early stage on ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting, research suggests that the gender pay gaps faced by Black or disabled women are higher. This means that work to close the gender pay gap must also pay attention to the intersectional profile of the workforce.

Conference believes that we need branches who are able and willing to work with their employer on a local level to tackle the gender pay gap and that they need the support from the Service Group Executive to deliver real change for members.

Conference calls on the Higher Education Service Group Committee to:

- 1) include calls on all HE employers to end the gender pay gap as part of annual pay claims, and encourage branches to do the same
- 2) work with the National Women's Committee to campaign to combat and smash the gender pay gap and consider adapting UNISON's "Bridge the Gap" campaign for Higher Education;
- 3) work with the National Women's Committee to promote negotiating guidelines to support branches to negotiate local action plans to close the gender pay gap;
- 4) work with the Learning & Organising Services team (LAOS) to develop bitesize training on understanding the gender pay gap and how to develop meaningful action plans to close the pay gap;
- 5) collate the annual published gender pay gap reports of UK HEIs and publish a short report that outlines the reported gender pay gap and tracks how this has changed at the reporting institution over the years;

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- 6) consider submitting a joint bid with the National Women's Committee to the Campaign Fund to commission research on the gender pay gap in Higher Education and the impact initiatives such as Athena Swan and Aurora are having on closing the gap;
- 7) include a session on tackling the gender pay gap at a future Higher Education conference or branch seminar.

### **2. Its not just that national pay bargaining hasn't kept pace with inflation**

**Carried**

University staff at all grades on the agreed pay scale have seen the value put on their work diminish year after year, not by some form of "natural process", not by erosion or gravity, but by deliberate choices made year on year by the people running the universities: they pay us less, as the sectors profits increase annually. Many colleagues are reduced to using food banks, taking second jobs, moving to smaller / shared accommodation – this is particularly felt amongst younger members – while in some households parents are skipping meals to ensure that their kids eat properly.

These reductions in our pay, have afflicted us for a decade and a half, they afflict us now, and through reduced pension contributions they will afflict us to our graves: robbed in the past, robbed in the present and robbed in the future.

That a so-called "World Class" sector believes this is acceptable, is little short of scandalous.

But these annual pay settlements are not the only problem with pay that our members are facing, it is also clear that "grade drift" has been a huge – perhaps hidden – problem for years. Employers are to varying degrees, 'gaming' the role analysis schemes they use, making it harder and harder for an individual to 'prove' to the employer that they are working at a level higher than the one they are being paid for: arguments over which key words apply in any given JD are common; arguments about what words such as – "manage"; "responsible"; "train" – and many others actually mean and how valuable the activity attached to each of these is, have become the bread and butter of casework with members. This sits alongside, the situation we have all seen, where a colleague or two leave, and rather than replacing them immediately, there is a review of the service to determine whether that work is still required or appropriate – and while that review is going on, some poor colleagues are covering the extra workload, on top of the already heavy workload they were doing. Quite often this can involve covering work from a higher grade. Such reviews can and do take years. In many cases, the new vacancy will be advertised at a lower grade, than the role was previously valued at.

Is it any wonder we are burnt-out, underpaid, and angry? In common with many of our fellow public sector workers.

It cannot go on like this, and this is why many branches have been taking strike action in the last 12 months.

We call on the SGE to:

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- 1) Urgently review the various role analysis schemes used in HE – the main ones being HERA and Hays – to determine whether they are still fit for purpose
- 2) Determine from HE providers the percentage of job vacancies in the sector, the speed with which these are filled, and whether they are advertised at the same or lower grade
- 3) Determine whether “benchmarking” has any real value to bring to the conversation, or if it is in fact a sector “marking its own homework”: agreeing with each other that certain jobs are of a lesser value than previously

### **3. Local settlements alongside the national pay bargaining**

**Carried**

It is clear that while UCEA as a group are doggedly refusing to admit there is a problem with pay in the sector – and given that UCEA members / advisors are getting their information from employees “over the top of the national pay scale” perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised – individual HEIs are increasingly making adjustments to pay and grading structures, or settlements, in consultation with local union branches – colleagues at places such as Hull, Glasgow, Bath Spa and many others are to be saluted on what they have secured for their members, while not breaking out of national pay bargaining.

This motion very simply calls for SGE, and / or National Office to pull together a crib sheet, information pack and perhaps a template, using examples of good practice from branches who have been successful in this, on ways that other branches can take these negotiations to their employer and seek to secure some uplift, and circulate this to all branches.

### **4. Fair Pay for Higher Education Staff in 2024-25**

**Carried**

Higher Education pay has fallen behind. Since 2009 our pay has lost around 28% of its value as a result of successive below inflation cost-of-living rises, year on year. The extreme increase in prices during 2022 and 2023 has brought this to a crisis point, and UNISON members working in Higher Education are facing real hardship as a result.

After bringing forward pay negotiations over the New JNCHES 2023-24 pay uplift the University and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) made their final pay offer of between 5 and 8%, depending on spinal column point, with a portion of this added to annual salaries early, backdated to February 2023. The dispute process was undertaken through ACAS conciliation in February and March 2023, and this resulted a slight increase in the portion of this overall pay uplift added to annual salaries backdated to February, to £1000 or 2%, whichever was the greater. The pay uplift was imposed from March 2023 payroll in most institutions despite all five trade unions remaining in dispute with UCEA.

With RPI inflation at 13.8% and even CPI at 10.4% in February 2023 when this pay uplift was imposed, and our pay only increasing by 5-8%, this pay rise was yet another pay cut.

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UNISON Higher Education Service Group Executive policy was to continue to use disaggregate balloting to build the number of strike mandates that we had in Higher Education. Strike mandates were won in 23 institutions during 2023, covering around a quarter of members on New JNCHES pay, including nine institutions where we had not succeeded in achieving a mandate previously. As a result, increasing numbers of UNISON members have been taking strike action for a pay rise that keeps up with inflation. In the aftermath of the cost-of-living crisis and with greatly increased bills members simply can't afford to live on the money that the employers imposed. Negotiations continue with UCEA at the time of writing to seek to agree terms of reference for negotiations over a new pay spine, action to tackle equalities pay gaps, precarious contract types and excessive workload. Whatever the outcome of these talks, 2023 price rises are not expected to be reversed and so we will still need to bargain for a significant pay rise in 2024-25. Conference believes UNISON should seek to restore the buying power of wages in Higher Education.

Conference instructs the Service Group Executive to seek to agree with the other recognised trade unions and submit a joint union pay claim to the University and Colleges Employers Association for 2024-25 which demands the following:

The deletion of spinal column points 3-7.

- 1) A pay increase for staff on spinal column points 8-32 of a flat rate increase of £5000 added to annual salaries or an increase in their salary to £15 per hour, whichever is the greater.
- 2) A pay increase for staff on spinal points 33 and over of a flat rate increase of £4000 added to annual salaries.
- 3) Negotiations to agree specific actions to tackle the gender, disability and ethnicity pay gaps to be implemented at institutional level.
- 4) Negotiations to agree specific actions to tackle the gender, disability and ethnicity pension gaps to be implemented at institutional level.
- 5) Negotiations to agree specific actions to move all staff onto a 35-hour week with no loss in pay to be implemented at institutional level.
- 6) All institutions to become Foundation Living Wage employers.

### **5. The Truth about Finances in the HE Sector**

**Carried**

Every year, UCEA representing the employers in the HE sector pay negotiations, state that while some universities are wealthy, there are universities that would struggle, indeed may be forced into considering redundancies, the closure of departments and so on, should a significant pay settlement be forced upon them.

For this reason, staff salaries have been forced down against inflation for the last 14 years. It would seem, following this logic, that staff pay reductions are being used to prop up bad business models.

Once we properly understand the situation in the sector, we can plan our strategy for getting staff pay back to acceptable levels.

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Conference calls on SGE to investigate the state of finances within the sector, to determine once and for all the truth of this claim made repeatedly by UCEA.

### **6. No Confidence in UCEA**

**Carried as Amended: 6.1**

For too many years now it seems that the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) are neither able nor willing to negotiate with the unions in good faith. It appears that perhaps UCEA is acting as an arm of the Conservative Government, representing year after year of increasingly austerity for staff working in Higher Education. Conversely, for Vice-Chancellor positions, the University and College Union (UCU) estimate an increase of average total remuneration from £268k p/a to over £300k p/a in the last two years after years of below inflation costs for most employees. Despite the best attempts of UNISON, and other unions, the picture doesn't seem to be improving.

As a result, we call upon Conference to demonstrate its unhappiness by holding a vote of no confidence in UCEA and instruct the Higher Education Service Group Executive to look to formulating other ways forward to promote better pay, terms and conditions for Higher Education staff, while maintaining our commitment to national pay bargaining through New JNCHES.

### **7. Free car parking for disabled workers in higher education**

**Carried**

Conference notes that disabled workers are entitled to reasonable adjustments to break down the barriers they face at work. However too many Higher Education employers continue to ignore requests for adjustments or to refuse them.

Conference notes that case law has established that the provision of a dedicated car parking space can be a reasonable adjustment. But conference also believes that disabled workers should be exempt from staff car parking charges as a reasonable adjustment.

Conference believes that disabled people who need to use their car to get to work should not be financially penalised due to their impairment.

Conference also notes that low paid disabled workers are often denied home working and are required to attend Higher Education workplaces every day. This means their parking costs are much higher compared to higher paid non-disabled staff who have much more access to remote working.

Conference therefore instructs the Service Group Executive to work with the national disabled members committee to:

- 1) Encourage higher education branches to raise this issue with the employer and seek agreements on free car parking for disabled workers;
- 2) Consider creating bargaining advice on car parking provision for disabled workers in higher education.

### **8. Negotiating for mental health support**

**Carried**

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Conference notes that increased workloads in Higher Education, coupled with the impact of the pandemic, has seen an increase in staff experiencing mental health problems.

Conference notes that workers with mental health problems which have a substantial impact on their normal day to day activities are likely to be disabled workers and entitled to protections under the Equality Act 2010.

Conference further notes that the crisis in Higher Education funding has seen welfare teams cut and the loss of mental health support for staff.

Conference therefore instructs the Service Group Executive to work with the national disabled members committee to:

- 1) Circulate UNISON's guide to bargaining on mental health to Higher Education branches and to regions;
- 2) Encourage Higher Education branches to seek to agree mental health policies with their employers;
- 3) Fight cuts to staff welfare support and campaign for fair funding for Higher Education.

### **9. Freedom of Speech is not an excuse for Hate Speech**

**Carried**

Conference notes that the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 is seen as a tool to 'safeguard' free speech and academic freedom in universities. It places a responsibility on Higher Education Providers and Students' Unions to actively promote freedom of speech, including making venues available to groups or speakers regardless of beliefs. This effectively means they can no longer de-platform speakers where debates are centred around gender and the rolling back of rights of trans people in our society.

Under the Act, universities will be fined by the Office for Students (OfS), if they fail to uphold legal responsibilities to free speech on campus. It further means that individuals will be able to seek compensation from Higher Education Institutions and Students' Unions which they believe have breached their legal obligations to facilitate free speech.

In a recent British Social Attitudes survey, it was revealed that hate crimes against trans people had risen by 11% in the last year compared with a drop of 6% against lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people in the same period. However, it is important to note both are hugely up overall when comparing the last five years. 186% increase in hate crimes against trans people and 112% increase in hate crimes against LGB people. This rise could be in large part attributed to the apparent constant stream of anti-trans disinformation made by the mainstream media and the government.

Conference recognises that many barriers to challenging discriminatory behaviour can be caused by a lack of education, information, support and robust policies in workplaces and it is essential that workplaces are allies for those with trans



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identities. Conference further notes the work already done by the National Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender+ Committee on development of the UNISON Trans Equality campaign. A key component of this campaign is the trans ally training programme which gives LGB and non-LGBT+ members the opportunity to explore what it means to be a trans ally. The campaign also has a growing network of trans, non-binary activists, many of whom are Higher Education members, who are active and campaign on a range of trans issues.

Conference therefore calls on the Higher Education Service Group Executive, working with the national LGBT+ committee as appropriate, to:

- 1) Encourage the negotiation of trans inclusive language in Higher Education agreements and policies, and of inclusive practices and procedures, across our Higher Education workplaces.
- 2) Urge branches where employers have no trans equality policy to seek to negotiate the adoption of UNISON's trans equality model policy.
- 3) Promote UNISON's trans ally training programme, across the service group and encourage all branches to run it for both activists and members.
- 4) Promote UNISON's trans, non-binary and gender diverse network and encourage Higher Education members to join if they identify as trans, non-binary and gender diverse.
- 5) Raise trans equality with employers and employer bodies and seek reviews of relevant policies and procedures in relation to Freedom of Speech.

### **10. Securing the Legacy of the Year of Black Workers in Higher Education**

**Carried**

This conference notes that the Year of Black Workers, and its focus of 'Establishing Legacy to Generate Change', is not the change we seek, it is merely the opportunity to generate change.

Black Workers across our society often find themselves in low-paid, insecure work, with poor terms and conditions. Despite the Westminster Government denying that institutional racism exists in our society, we know that it does and there is evidence that institutional and structural racism exist in Higher Education (HE). We want this to change.

UNISON campaigns for decent pay in universities – including a living wage for the lowest paid – as well as an eradication of the gender and ethnicity pay gap and to stop the use of zero-hour contracts and the casualisation of work. With UNISON having an estimated 185,000 Black members, it is imperative that we now build upon our long history of achievement in tackling inequities in our society to enable Black members working in HE to take the next step in our journey towards justice.

University employers should value the hard work of our members in continuing to adapt and deliver services, keeping universities open and students supported. However, actions speak louder than words and that there is evidence that Black staff are overlooked and discriminated against.

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In 2017, an independent review undertaken by Baroness McGregor-Smith (of race in the workplace in the UK) found that: a) In terms of opportunities for progression, 29% of Black Caribbean employees reported feeling that they have been overlooked for promotion because of their ethnicity. b) In terms of top management positions, the Black and Black British group did particularly poorly over the period between 2007 and 2012, with the number of Black/Black British people in top management positions decreasing by 42%. c) 30% of those from a Black background reported experiencing or witnessing racial harassment or bullying from management in the last five years. The situation is unlikely to differ in HE. Indeed, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) found in 2020 that no Black staff were employed at the most senior levels of leadership in British universities. In 2021/2 there were 5 Black staff employed at a senior level. In associate professional and technical occupations in 2021/2, of 1670 staff, 40 identified as Black.

UNISON is far more than just another Trade Union; UNISON is an organisation that seeks to improve the lives of its members and wider society by challenging the status quo and seeking to generate change. With this being the case, this conference calls on the Higher Education Service Group Executive Committee to:

- 1) Work with the National Black Members Committee and other Self-Organised Groups to understand the number of Black members in the Service Group, and work to encourage those that do not have their ethnicity recorded in their membership data to update this.
- 2) Work with the National Black Members Committee and other Self-Organised Groups to analyse and interpret the data captured from (point 1) to create and implement a strategic plan to work towards ensuring that Black members are represented proportionately within the structures of the Service Group from Branch to Executive levels.
- 3) Work with the National Black Members Committee to develop an action plan for supporting Black members to become active within the union and their workplaces.
- 4) Work with the National Black Members Committee, Regions, and Branches to capture Ethnicity Pay Gap data from HE employers, and support Branches to work with Higher Education Service Group Executive Committee, to develop a strategy to reduce the pay gap, with the long-term aim of eradicating it in its entirety.
- 5) Work with the National Black Members Committee and UNISON's Learning and Organising Service to develop a training and development plan to ensure that all activists within the Service Group receive training in 'Defining Black' and the 'Race Discrimination Protocol'.
- 6) Work with Branches and the National Black Members Committee to collect the data around the number of Race/Equality cases within Higher Education, analyse the data to identify any commonalities between the cases and work with the toolkit developed by UNISON to tackle these issues.
- 7) Support Branches within Higher Education to negotiate with employers to get them to sign UNISON's Anti Racism Charter, and support the Ethnicity Pay Gap (EPG) campaign.

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Furthermore, this conference believes, that by taking these steps, UNISON will be able to work towards its mission of ‘establishing legacy to generate change’, but more importantly, these steps will support Branches, the Higher Education Service Group Executive Committee and UNISON as a whole to be able to meet the needs of our Black members, and improve our ability to lead the way in the journey towards the more Equitable and just society we all want, need and deserve moving forward in 2024.

### 11. Minimum Service Levels

**Carried**

Conference notes the continuing failure of the government to invest and maintain a wide variety of public services in the UK, with almost every institution showing signs of underinvestment in systems, infrastructure, and staffing.

Most of the public services delivered by UNISON members are showing sign of this strain despite often heroic efforts to maintain service levels with fewer staff. Initial staffing shortages can be caused by both an inability to recruit to vacant roles following years of real terms pay cuts and a simple unwillingness by government to spend the funds required to properly staff services. A vicious cycle can then develop in these struggling services, where efforts by staff to cope with unmanageable workloads leads to increased levels of stress-related absence, putting more pressure on the staff who remain and making it more likely they themselves will need time off.

The HSE’s annual statistics on work-related stress, anxiety, or depression for 2022 note that:

- 914,000 workers reported suffering from work related stress, depression, or anxiety in 2021/22, an increase in the rate reported prior to the pandemic in 2018/19.
- Workload remains the highest reported contributing factor to this absence.
- Education, Human health and social work activities, public administration and defence, and compulsory social security (categories that correspond to many of the public service roles UNISON members work in) all had “significantly higher rates than average” of work-related stress, anxiety, and depression.

This experience of UNISON members, of minimal staffing levels and an insistence that more is done with less, is one UNISON members in higher education definitely share, with support staff in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) often reporting a failure to maintain numbers of staff even as numbers of students increase and the demands to deliver excellent services remain.

Conference notes as such that when it comes to the professional and support services provided by UNISON members across Higher Education, it’s often arguable whether staffing is sufficient to maintain a “minimum” level of service during the normal course of the academic year.

In this context, conference notes with frustration the announcement by Education Secretary Gillian Keegan of a “consultation” on whether Higher Education should be

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included in the public services subject to arbitrary “minimum service levels” specified by the secretary of state during periods of industrial action.

As in the other services affected by this policy, conference believes that this proposal:

- Completely fails to recognise the overwhelming case for improved pay and working conditions in Higher Education, which is responsible for the extent and duration for industrial action in recent years.
- Comes after the government’s own failure to properly fund Universities to a level such that they are able to maintain proper service levels outside of periods of industrial action.
- Would be, as in other sectors, a deeply draconian and unprecedented breach of the rights of workers to withdraw their labour, as can be seen in the condemnation of the proposals by the French, German, Italian and Spanish trade union federations of the plans.

Conference calls on the Service Group Executive to:

- 1) Formulate, with other Higher Education unions, a submission to any government consultation that highlights that the key issue lying behind industrial action in Higher Education is ultimately a drastic deterioration in staff pay and conditions, with insufficient funding of the sector a major contributing factor; and which highlights the sufficient difficulties in objectively determining any minimum service levels across such a diverse sector and,
- 2) If necessary and with other service groups, develop robust guidance for branches on continuing to take effective industrial action in the face of the legislation.

### **12. Bring outsourced services back in-house**

**Carried**

Conference notes that

On 1 August 2013, Ulster University outsourced its facilities services, i.e. cleaners, porters, security officers, mail room staff and all catering services which were transferred out to two companies, NOONAN Service Group and Mount Charles Catering.

Staff were transferred to NOONAN and Mount Charles under TUPE. Anyone employed after 1 August 2013 was employed on NOONAN or Mount Charles terms and conditions, meaning 15 days less annual leave per year, no enhanced sick pay, no paid family responsibilities leave and significantly lower employer’s pension contributions.

Ulster University recently became accredited with the real Living Wage Foundation, something that they readily agreed to, meaning a real-terms pay rise of 14% for low paid workers.

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Conference believes that

- 1) This two-tiered system is inherently unfair to those workers employed after 1 August 2013.
- 2) Any staff employed before 1 August 2013 should keep their university terms and conditions at a minimum.
- 3) The only solution is to campaign for Ulster University to bring these services back in-house, where they belong.

Conference instructs the Higher Education Service Group

- 1) To lobby UCEA to encourage all Higher Education employers to become real Foundation Living Wage employers.
- 2) To oppose outsourcing of any kind in Higher Education.
- 3) To seek to work with regions, branches and members where services are outsourced, including Ulster University, to campaign to bring all outsourced services back in house.

### **13. Fund our universities properly**

**Carried**

Conference Notes:

Public services have been systematically underfunded for years and Higher Education is not exempt from austerity and cutbacks. Whilst different funding systems operate across the four UK nations, delivering funding based on grants, tuition fee loans or both, what unites many Higher Education Institutions is that money is scarce and high inflation has reduced the real-terms value of income streams, whilst costs have massively increased.

Some of the more prestigious universities have managed to partially offset this by recruiting more and more students, in particular, international students willing to pay ever increasing tuition fees. This is creating a significant risk, if and when geopolitical events mean that the supply of students from a major country ends abruptly, but more to the point, universities should not have to rely on volatile income streams for their continued financial stability.

Endless competition between universities for more and more students means that millions of pounds are wasted on marketing, or unnecessarily striking buildings, when higher education institutions should be collaborating. Instability is now a major feature of the system with one university building new classrooms, alongside another closing courses, in the same city.

Some universities, since last year's Conference, have reported significant financial problems, and this has resulted in moves to force through redundancies and restructures. Our members' jobs are dependent on financially viable institutions,

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whether funding comes from tuition fee loans, government grants, research contracts, accommodation fees or international student fees.

Unless there's a significant shift in funding available, the majority of which currently comes directly or indirectly (i.e. tuition fee loans) from central and/or devolved governments, the situation will get worse.

Whilst we can argue with individual employers about the level of risk we expect them to take to fund nationally or locally agreed decisions over pay and associated costs, some institutions are close to being in major financial difficulties. Competent Vice-Chancellors or Principals will not allow institutions to collapse. They will act to save their own lucrative jobs and careers by downsizing and destroying courses, schools and departments, taking health and safety risks and failing to provide adequate student support etc.

Discussions between UCEA (the employers' organisation) and the five Higher Education trade unions, will, it is hoped, reach some common understanding of the situation, but we don't need to wait for reports to know that the situation in many universities is already terrible and likely to get worse.

Conference instructs the Service Group Executive to:

- 1) Explore the reality of Higher Education finances to better inform our members about the financial situation across the sector and within individual workplaces.
- 2) Continue to campaign for adequate funding for all higher education institutions, and for this to be in the form of grants.
- 3) Continue to make sure that our union's opposition to tuition fees and support for a publicly funded, joined up Higher Education system is prominent in our union's campaigning material.
- 4) Seek to support all branches and regions where members are facing job cuts and attacks on their terms and conditions as a result of management's reaction to inadequate funding.

### **14. A new start for Higher Education**

**Carried**

Conference believes:

- 1) Higher Education is a crucial sector that can contribute to the wealth and happiness of all;
- 2) Solving the problems that confront society in the 21st century requires Higher Education to be funded and organised in the most efficient way;
- 3) Higher education should be well funded from general taxation with a public service ethos rather than wasteful, market competition;

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- 4) Everyone that can benefit from education should have access across their lifespan; this is best achieved by free tuition for all, with maintenance grants and measures to support participation for all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This should be paid for from progressive, general taxation.

Conference further believes:

- 1) The gains of Higher Education and research can be maximised through international cooperation;
- 2) The association of the UK to Horizon Europe and Copernicus under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement is a positive development that must be built on;
- 3) Free movement of students to study and staff to work benefits the sector.
- 4) Our members would much prefer to work in universities which are fully-funded, free from competition and open to all.

Conference calls upon the SGE:

- 1) To seek to work with Labour Link to campaign within the labour movement to support the above goals, specifically to lobby any future Labour Government to adopt the above vision for Higher Education.

### **15. Oppose Minimum Service Levels**

**Carried**

Conference notes the passage of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023.

Conference believes this Act represents a grave threat to unions' ability to take effective strike action in the sectors of health, education services, fire and rescue, border security, and nuclear decommissioning.

Conference notes the Government announced on 2 October 2023 that it intends to consult on minimum service levels in universities.

Conference believes minimum service levels in Higher Education would represent a threat to our union's ability to take effective strike action to defend the interests of our members, including on such crucial issues as pay.

Conference instructs the SGE to:

- 1) work with the NEC to respond formally to any Government consultation on this issue.
- 2) work with regions and branches to raise awareness among members of the risks of minimum service levels to effective trade unionism.
- 3) campaign against minimum service levels in universities should they be introduced.

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### 16. Automation and Universities

Fell

### 17. Hormone/ Menopause Policy For Higher Education

Carried

Approximately 3.5 million women, trans and non-binary people across the UK workforce are going through the menopause. A House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee report published in October 2022 states that “51% of the population will experience menopause” and that “women of menopausal age are the fastest growing group in the workforce who are staying in the workplace for longer than ever before”. The report also says that “a 2019 survey conducted by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) found that three in five menopausal women – usually aged between 45 and 55 - were negatively affected at work”. Although the average age for women to reach menopause is 51, premature and surgical menopause affects many people, including trans and non-binary people.

Symptoms can include and are not limited to hot flushes, memory issues, mood swings, difficulty sleeping, joint pain, anxiety, and depression. At times these symptoms can have a huge impact on members work and home life and their overall sense of wellbeing. It is also worth noting that experiencing severe symptoms of menopause can be classed as a disability under the Equality Act.

The Branch believes that Menopause is an organisational/workplace, health and safety and equality issue for Higher Education which needs action.

We believe all universities should have a menopause/hormone policy in place to support workers. A menopause/hormone policy we believe can be used to close the gender pay gap. This will ensure those going through the menopause are not forced to reduce their hours, leave their roles due to pre and/or post-menopausal symptoms that can go on for several years.

A policy in place in all HE branches will make women, trans and non-binary people feel supported and not pushed out of work or unable to access training or promotion opportunities.

Tasks and workloads should be reviewed by employers to understand what adjustments could be introduced to aide both individual and wider team/group needs. For example, individual adjustments around flexible working times, location of work, ability to take a break when experiencing severe symptoms, risk assessments for roles that are largely performed by women, and in wider terms investment into technology and equipment to assist with the capture of information so that members do not feel under pressure to remember detailed information, regular assessment of procedures requiring people to be customer facing for long periods of time e.g. length of rota or shift are both ways that could improve the workplace and assist all members generally.

We call on the Higher Education Service Group Executive to:



## 2024 National Higher Education Conference Decisions

- i) Campaign to introduce and highlight the importance of menopause/hormone policies into Higher Education.
- ii) Campaign for better healthcare information for women, trans and non-binary people in Higher Education experiencing the menopause at work and increase awareness of relevant workplace rights.
- iii) Campaign to protect and support members who experience alleged menopause discrimination in Higher Education.
- iv) Widen training for all Higher Education members and Higher Education reps on the impact of the menopause.

### 18. Reverse Visa Fee Increases

**Carried**

This conference notes that:

On the 15th of September 2023, the House of Commons published a research briefing which explains that visas and related fees have risen significantly above inflation and above processing costs. Then, on the 18th of September, the Home Office officially announced 15-35% rises to visa fees, which took effect on the 4th of October, and a future 66% rise to the Immigration and Health Surcharge (a fee which migrants pay upfront for each year of their visa to fund the NHS in addition to their taxes) as a way to fund public sector pay rises.

While everyone can agree that the public sector needs pay rises, the planned increases to migrant fees are a political choice to pit workers against each other. The IPPR spelled out several progressive tax options available to the government to fund public sector pay rises without impacting inflation that do not involve robbing one group to pay another. UNISON condemned the planned increases in July, as we have seen the impact of the already extortionately high fees, and essentially double taxation, on members, especially those at universities with already tightening purse strings.

The total upfront costs for visas in the UK in 2021 was higher than the 17 countries rated highest for research excellence, according to a study by Fragomen and the Royal Society. The biggest upfront cost component is the Immigration Health Surcharge, which costs applicants £624 pounds per year of their visa in 2021 (£3120 for a five-year visa). The proposed increase set to take place sometime before the summer of 2024 will mean that that same person would have to pay £5,175 for the health surcharge – before adding on the increased cost of the actual visa.

This conference believes that:

Although migrant staff in all sectors will be affected, which is why sixty-eight trade unions from the BMA, the GMB, and the UCU have signed a joint Trade Union and Migrant Org Statement #TogetherAgainstCharging, students and Higher Education staff will be deeply affected whether they are the ones facing a higher visa cost, or not. According to HESA data on Higher Education staff, in 2020/2021, 32% of academic staff were non-UK nationals, and 12% of non-academic staff were non-UK nationals.

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There are implications for university finances which have potential knock-on effects for all university staff and students, as International Student Fees are projected to make up 25% of HE provider total income. As fees become prohibitive to potential students, university budgets may need to tighten accordingly. Additionally, there has been a 19% increase in the cost to the university to sponsor international students and certificates of sponsorship for skilled workers have gone up by 20%, which will have a direct and immediate impact on university budgets and forecasts.

Even where the university does not pay these costs directly, there are concerns from the research and Higher Education sector that the fees will level down the UK and have a detrimental effect on the HE sector as a whole, especially given the disproportionate impact the fees have on students looking to take up the graduate route and early career scholars.

Finally, the migrants on the long route to citizenship, called the 10-year route, are the most likely to be hardest hit by these increases, and are likely to be taking up short-term research contracts on the graduate route, after years of studying in the UK, all of which do not count towards shorter routes to citizenship. Although migrants not currently in the UK could decide not to migrate because of the high costs, for the thousands of those already in the UK who call it their home, leaving is not an option.

Therefore, this conference instructs UNISON Higher Education Service Group Executive to:

- 1) Publicly lobby the government to:
  - i) abandon these plans to increase the IHS fees.
  - ii) reduce visa fees to the cost of processing them.
  - iii) eliminate the 10-year route in favour of a 5-year route to indefinite leave to remain for any visa type.
- 2) urgently raise the issue with UNISON's National Executive Council
- 3) Promote the 'We are Here' Campaign by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants.
- 4) Take this motion to the National Delegate Conference.

### **20. UNISON in students' unions**

**Carried**

Conference Notes:

- 1) UNISON in Higher Education represents staff in a range of roles and professions. This includes staff employed by Students' Unions.
- 2) Students' Union staff experience challenges of low pay, job insecurity and workload as much as any in the sector.

## **2024 National Higher Education Conference Decisions**

- 3) Students' Unions, Associations and Guilds comprise a range of organisational structures which can create barriers to our branches engaging effectively with members.

Conference Further Notes:

- 1) The Tory Government's Higher Education reforms have disproportionately impacted on Students' Unions, in relation to freedom of speech regulation.
- 2) Students' Unions have a tradition of nurturing the development of progressive ideas and practices, from the peace movement to anti-racist activity and for the advancement of women's and LGBT+ rights.
- 3) As a trade union in this sector, a healthy students' movement compliments our aspirations of fairness at work and justice in society.

Conference Resolves to instruct the Service Group Executive to:

- 1) Seek to work with regions and branches to commence a programme of work to engage and develop membership and activism in our Students' Union workplaces.
- 2) Conduct a survey of all HE branches to establish how local Students' Unions are organised (as component part of the University, separate employers, included in national terms and conditions etc).
- 3) Encourage the sharing of best practice across regions for HE branches' engagement with their Students' Unions.
- 4) Develop recruitment materials and communications targeted at Students' Union staff.
- 5) Set up and support a Students' Unions in UNISON network.

### **21. Organising young members in Higher Education following the age limit rule change**

**Carried**

Conference notes the rule change passed at National Delegate Conference 2023 which raised the age limit for young members from all those aged 26 and under to all those aged 30 and under.

Conference further notes that this roughly doubles the number of young members in UNISON, and is therefore a unique opportunity to build engagement and activism among young members, including in Higher Education.

Conference notes that recent industrial action in the Higher Education service group has been strongly supported by young members in the institutions taking industrial action, and believes that branches in Higher Education can also build on this enthusiasm to recruit more young members across Higher Education.

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Conference notes the 2020 report from the National Young Members Forum, 'Getting Active in UNISON' which identified some of the challenges and opportunities in organising young members in UNISON, and which made recommendations to branches wishing to build membership and engagement from younger workers.

Conference asks the Higher Education Service Group Executive to:

- 1) Publicise the rule change to the age limit of young members across the service group;
- 2) Consider surveying branches on levels of membership, activity and engagement by young members across the service group, and identifying challenges and opportunities;
- 3) Work with UNISON's National Young Members' Forum to develop a young members' organising strategy, in line with the "Organising to Win" national strategy, to increase membership and participation across the Higher Education service group with a view to improving industrial strength and organisation and furthering the struggle for HE pay and conditions;
- 4) Promote engagement of young members within HE branches as workplace contacts and shop stewards;
- 5) Encourage all HE branches to elect a Young Members' Officer and work with branches in HE to effectively organise local young members' groups where possible;
- 6) Publicise the National Young Members Forum report 'Getting Active in UNISON' and its recommendations to branches and regional service group committees in Higher Education;
- 7) Share examples of successful organising with young members within the Higher Education service group.

## 2024 National Higher Education Conference Decisions

### Composites

#### A. Democracy in the University – Encourage & Support

Carried

UNISON HE Conference Notes:

- a) That many universities have, or have had, elected staff positions on the “council” or board of governors / trustees. In Scotland, elected trade union reps are included in courts.
- b) That this small glimmer of worker democracy is relatively unusual compared to other sectors in the UK economy.
- c) That there is a general trend towards employers phasing out or reducing staff positions on governing bodies, and/or replacing elected staff positions with “appointed” positions.
- d) That UNISON Reps elected to university governing bodies of universities have played important roles in ensuring external governors are aware of the realities of the university, not just senior management spin, and in balancing debates to ensure staff welfare, employment law and equitable treatment are prioritised.
- e) That UNISON Reps who are elected as staff governors often face attempts at exclusion or “second tier” status and do not currently have access to independent training, advice and support in these roles through their trade union.

UNISON HE Conference Believes:

- 1) That democracy is good.
- 2) That workers are often expected to yield unquestioningly to the demands of a boss - a form of tyranny that we wouldn't accept outside of work.
- 3) That a central role of unions is to enable workers to democratise the workplace.
- 4) That a university is its staff and students, not shiny buildings.
- 5) That all universities should have elected staff governors, including for support staff.
- 6) That staff governors should be elected by their peers, and not appointed by senior managers or other governors, if they are to be free to carry out their role
- 7) That without support, staff governors can find themselves isolated from their colleagues, ineffective, unsure of their rights, controlled or manipulated by senior managers or governors and/or unable to act to their best of their ability to truly benefit the university, i.e. its staff and students.
- 8) That the training and guidance provided to university staff governors is often from employers or other organisations with an interest or set of positions in favour of upholding existing power structures within universities.

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9) That UNISON branches should encourage and support Reps to stand for election to university employer governing bodies.

10) That UNISON branches should support Reps elected to university employer governing bodies.

11) That UNISON branches should put in place structures to ensure UNISON Reps in university governance positions understand the collective view of other workers, and are able to feedback to staff on important developments within the employer and the positions they have taken as governors in debates and votes.

UNISON HE Conference resolves:

- To mandate the SGE to oversee and commission production of guidance and training for UNISON branches on:

a) university governance;

b) best practice in the sector;

c) bargaining for more democratic governance structures;

d) ways for workers and their unions to most effectively engage and participate with governance structures to ensure worker interests are prioritised;

e) supporting UNISON Reps in standing for governor election;

f) the rights and protections of staff governors;

g) structures to help UNISON Reps in staff governor roles understand the views of and feedback information to the staff body;

h) relevant corporate and charity law, regulation through OfS and guidance and best practice from CUC and other organisations.