



10 January 2018

Dear Vice Chancellor,

Following our last Union Executive Committee meeting (9<sup>th</sup> January 2018), I am writing on behalf of the Students' Union in relation to the current dispute over USS pensions, which risks a considerable reduction in the retirement benefits staff may receive.

As a union, we believe that all academic staff have a right to job security, and that fair pensions are a part of this security. Whilst we do not wish at this time to take a position in relation to the University or local branch of UCU on this dispute, we strongly feel that it is in the best interests of students at the University to minimise the disruption which would result from sustained strike action.

As the Executive Committee discussed, the current pensions dispute stands to significantly disadvantage current students who may pursue a career in higher education. Furthermore, academic staff at the University are vital to not only the growth and wellbeing of our students, but are fundamental to their time here at Surrey.

With these thoughts in mind, we would like to ask that you, in your position as one of the most prominent Vice Chancellors in the UK, publically outline the position that you have taken within UUK regarding the pensions dispute. Further to this, we call upon you to use your role within UUK to support a swift, mutually-agreeable outcome from the dispute.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Saskia Cochrane', written over a horizontal line.

Saskia Cochrane  
President of USSU  
On behalf of the USSU Executive Committee

## **Standing in solidarity with UCU and their fight for fair pensions!**

Proposed by: Jake Roberts (subsequently amended by the Executive Committee)

### **USSU notes:**

1. The University and College Union (UCU) is currently balloting its members for strike action over Universities UK's (UUK's) plans to scrap guaranteed pension benefits from the sector's main retirement fund.
  - a. This ballot closes on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> January.<sup>i</sup>
  - b. The action proposed by the national UCU includes a series of strikes by lecturers, as well as refusals to reschedule classes or substitute for sick colleagues, to be held in February next year.<sup>ii</sup> This does not necessarily describe what action Surrey UCU will take, however.
2. Independent analysis from First Actuarial estimates that UUK's plans would reduce retirement benefits paid by between 20% and 40%, depending upon grade and length of service.<sup>iii</sup>
3. UCU general secretary Sally Hunt has said the plans would leave academics "facing years of stress about whether their pension investments are returning enough income to live on"<sup>iv</sup>
4. UCU represents academic staff in the UK, including researchers, postgraduate researchers, teaching staff, and permanent lecturers. It has around 40,000 members.
5. UUK is an advocacy organisation for all UK universities, whose membership consists of all the vice-chancellors or principals of universities in the UK.
6. A consultative ballot of UCU members in October 2017 showed that nearly 87% of UCU members were prepared to take industrial action over the issue.<sup>v</sup>
7. Under the Trade Union Act 2016, industrial action is now only lawful if a ballot turnout is at least 50%.<sup>vi</sup>
8. USSU represents around 3,600 postgraduate students at Surrey, some of whom are represented by UCU (though not necessarily affected by the pension changes).<sup>vii</sup>

### **USSU believes:**

1. All academic staff have a right to job security. Fair pensions are a key part of this security.
2. UCU members should go on strike to protect their pensions, or take action short of a strike.
3. Lecturers' *working* conditions are students' *learning* conditions. The well-being and job security of students' teachers and lecturers is not just a staff issue, it is also a student one.
4. The success of any potential strike action depends on the mobilisation of as many UCU members as possible, across the country. Students' unions have an important role to play in this mobilisation, as institutions of significant resources and memberships.

### **USSU resolves:**

1. To encourage PGR UCU members to vote in the ballot for industrial action.
  - a. This involves raising awareness of the dispute on the Union's Facebook and Twitter pages, and other social media, amongst other things.<sup>viii</sup>
2. To be in close contact with Surrey UCU throughout the period of balloting and potential industrial action, and offer firm support for any of their needs that do not conflict with USSU's members.

3. To write a public letter to Surrey's Vice-Chancellor, Max Lu, asking him to publicly outline the position he has taken within UUK regarding the pensions dispute and to support a swift, mutually-agreed outcome.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/9093/Overhaul-of-university-pensions-could-leave-staff-200000-worse-off-in-retirement>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/14177>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8906/USS-ballot-statement/pdf/ucu\\_strikeballotletter\\_nov17.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8906/USS-ballot-statement/pdf/ucu_strikeballotletter_nov17.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/14177>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/7e391688-b4c5-11e7-a398-73d59db9e399>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/15/contents/enacted>

<sup>vii</sup> 3,600 figure applies to 2016/17. Data for 2017/18 are not available. See here:

[https://www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/R40\\_Student\\_Key\\_Facts\\_2016\\_17\\_all.pdf](https://www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/R40_Student_Key_Facts_2016_17_all.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Social media resources are available here: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/strikeforuss>

<sup>ix</sup> Vice-Chancellors at Warwick ([http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/execteam/entry/which\\_way\\_forward/](http://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/execteam/entry/which_way_forward/)) and Glasgow ([https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/news/headline\\_561539\\_en.html](https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/news/headline_561539_en.html)) have publicly voiced opposition to the proposals, for example.