

Voluntary Severance at Brookes – by Alan Reeve

This is a brief up-date on the VS situation following the meeting of the Joint Staff Committee two weeks ago and a verbal report from the management.

To date, we understand that around 300 staff have expressed an interest in taking VS, and of these at the time of writing we believe some 50 have been processed and accepted. Given that the university is aiming to save £3.7 million from offering VS and assuming that each post, including on-costs and on average represents a saving of £50k, this leaves a shortfall of anything from 50 to 70 jobs, in our estimation. The management have made it clear that once the September deadline has passed we could be in a redundancy situation if the planned savings have not been achieved, and that in that case they will sack staff with no VS compensation. Our response to this has been consistent and we have told the management that if compulsory redundancies become a reality, we will be calling on members to vote on some form of industrial action. We are attempting to get the support of UNISON members in this. Any attempt to impose compulsory redundancies would be particularly unacceptable and in our view illegal as we know from informal discussions that many colleagues have been refused voluntary severance.

In terms of the VSS process, we have concerns that there has been a degree of complacency on the part of the employer in failing to efficiently handle some applications, and a number of members have felt very frustrated that they still do not know if their applications have been accepted. If anyone is still in this position, can they please let their Faculty rep, or a Branch Officer know and they will chase it up. (Continued on page 3)

Restructuring at Oxford Brookes – By Andy Kilmister

One of the main issues which UCU branch officers have had to deal with over the last few months at Brookes has been a number of restructuring proposals in particular departments or faculties. The first of these centred on Oxford Brookes International (OBI) and we had extensive discussions about the proposed move of most of OBI into the Business School, with the remainder shifting into Upgrade. More recently we have been involved in consultation about the restructuring of the Business School itself and of the Foundation Diploma in Arts and Design and discussions here remain ongoing.

Some of the main things we have been arguing for in all these cases are the following

- Making sure that enhanced voluntary severance is available for staff affected by restructuring even if the nature of the restructuring process means that the central university deadlines for this can't be met
- Ensuring that whenever possible staff are 'slotted' over into equivalent new roles rather than having to undergo competitive recruitment processes
- Ensuring that any staff who end up in positions at a lower grade than they had previously have their salaries protected for two years. (Continued on page 2)

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In the OBI restructuring we can report that compulsory redundancies have been avoided and salaries have been protected. In addition a number of key roles have been filled by slotting. There remain several areas of concern which we will be monitoring over the next year. In particular UCU believes that the new structure does not include sufficient senior lecturer (SL) posts and that consequently SLs may be in danger of being overworked. Despite our arguments the university is continuing to use the 'university teacher' grade in the new arrangements – we continue to believe that colleagues in these roles should be upgraded to lecturer status (several are being upgraded as part of the restructuring but not all). We will also be watching closely to make sure that the new structure does not lead to an increased use of associate lecturers and a cut-down in full time and fractional staff and we will campaign against any attempt to increase casualization in employment.

We will be adopting the same approach to other restructurings as they occur. We have already had a lively and successful meeting of UCU members in the Business School and have used that to feed our views back to the School management. If any members have additional points they want to raise in response to restructurings which affect them then please let your branch officers know and we will take these up.

Finally, we are very conscious that restructurings can be used by university management as a way of dividing and separating the workforce so that changes can be pushed through at a local level and the obligations which result from broader university wide change can be avoided. We will be watching any attempt to do this vigilantly and drawing connections between the different changes going on in order to provide maximum support and protection for members.

Electronic coursework submissions – by Alan Reeve

Members will be aware that at the last Academic Board, a proposal put by the Students Union that all coursework submissions can be submitted electronically was accepted. This would include Masters dissertations, some of which are 20,000 words in length. We raised this as a concern at the JSC, particularly the fact that the proposal had not been discussed by any of the other relevant university committees on which UCU are represented – including the Workload Planning Committee. We were told at JSC that there was no evidence that electronic submissions would create more work for academic staff, and that we could always print the work off and mark it that way – and anyway, a lot of academics' handwriting is illegible, so it would be better if comments were added electronically as well....

This is another example of a failure on the part of the management to consult properly staff affected by such policies, and of indifference to the legitimate concerns we raise about their potential consequences. A number of members have come to us and expressed their anger that this has been allowed to go through, and will be implemented from September; and they are rightly asking how they will find time to print off the coursework they will be marking, and whether any provision has been made in terms of workloads or administrative support for this – as far as we know, it hasn't. We have undertaken to survey our members on their views and experience here – particularly in terms of the difficulty/ ease of marking on-line; and the time implications of this, especially if work has to be printed off before it can be marked. We will be putting together a Survey Monkey survey in the next few weeks, but in the meantime if anyone has immediate views they wish to express, please write to the Branch Chair.

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The unanswered question – although we have raised it – is how will the work of colleagues who are accepted for VS be handled? Again, we have serious concerns that the full workloads of up to 120 staff will simply be redistributed to remaining staff who are already, in many cases, very overloaded. As an aside, when asked at the JSC on what basis the management were targeting posts that could go, we were told that their main concern was to protect front-line jobs...when challenged to tell us which jobs are not front-line, the response was that all jobs are front-linewe can only conclude that all jobs are equal but some are more equal than others.

Finally, we have asked for weekly up-dates on the VS numbers, but nothing has so far been forthcoming



Results of Consultative Ballot

On 27 June, the ballot closed for consultation on employers' pay offer of 2%. Overall, 82% of members voting to reject, and 65% voted in favour of taking industrial action. Turnout across UCU was 47.7%.

At Oxford Brookes, the turnout was slightly lower, with 46.6% of members voting.

Of that turnout, 72.9% voted to reject the pay offer, and 27.1% voted to accept the offer.

61.8% voted in favour of taking industrial action, whereas 38.2% were not in favour of industrial action.

UCU will now campaign for a national strike ballot, which will open in August and close in October.

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