

2 March 2020

Michelle Donelan MP  
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Dear Ms Donelan

Congratulations on your recent appointment as Universities Minister – it is a hugely important brief at a crucial time for the higher education sector.

I am writing on behalf of the University and College Union (UCU) to ask for an urgent meeting to discuss the current national industrial disputes at universities.

UCU members at 74 UK institutions are currently taking strike action as part of two disputes – one over changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), and one over pay and conditions.

I have enclosed a briefing on the disputes but, in short, members are striking because their pay has fallen sharply over the last decade, work overload and insecure employment are widespread problems across the sector, very little progress has been made in tackling equality pay gaps and recent changes to USS pensions mean the average member stands to lose around £240,000 over their lifetime. Strike action is always a last resort, but our members feel their employers have left them with no choice.

UCU has been engaged in extended negotiations with the employers' representatives in an effort to resolve both disputes. We have approached these negotiations in good faith and made progress in some areas but, regretfully, we have not yet received an offer that would be sufficient to resolve either dispute.

Crucially, the employers have so far refused to engage meaningfully on the key issues of pay and member contributions to the USS pension, which has been a major barrier to finding an agreeable solution.

Our members have been heartened by the overwhelming support from students during the disputes, and we welcome the recent letter from Jake Verity on behalf of 26 students' unions and NUS UK calling on the employers to deliver a resolution.

I urge you to join these students in putting pressure on the employers' representatives to bring forward an improved offer that properly addresses all aspects of both disputes. During the 2018 strikes one of your predecessors, Sam Gyimah, made a valuable intervention along these lines and we would appreciate your support in pushing for a resolution as quickly as possible. UCU stands ready to continue negotiations and give serious consideration to any improved offer that the employers bring forward.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Grady', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Jo Grady  
General Secretary