

To: all staff
From: vc.communications@durham.ac.uk on behalf of the VC
Date: 10 July 2023
Subject: Vice-Chancellor's letter to all staff

****This update is being issued to all Durham University staff, on behalf of Professor Karen O'Brien, Vice-Chancellor and Warden****

Dear colleagues,

Industrial Action: resumption of national talks - an opportunity to end the stalemate

UCEA and UCU have agreed to meet to discuss the current industrial action and how both parties might move forward from the present situation as regards strike action and the current marking and assessment boycott.

I speak both for myself and my University Executive colleagues in saying this is a very welcome development. Last week our local UCU branch confirmed in a meeting that they too welcome this as a potentially positive development. For some weeks now we have been pressing for a resumption of talks, recognising that there needs to be flexibility on all sides and that, in a context of national pay bargaining, this is the only way to make meaningful progress.

We need to end the stalemate and find a way forward that works for all parties. A commitment to restarting negotiations is an encouraging step.

We also welcome the joint commitment of UCU and UCEA to establish a shared framework for understanding sector finances.

The last few years have been extremely difficult for all in our sector. Colleagues and students who experienced the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic are now facing increased cost of living pressures and the impact of ongoing industrial action. We know that no member of our Durham community ever wanted to find ourselves in the position that we now do.

Supporting our students

I know that all staff, regardless of their position on the marking and assessment boycott, sincerely want what is best for our students. I am very grateful to all of you who have supported our students over recent weeks and who played a role in our Congregations, which were memorable and happy occasions. I was inspired by the enthusiasm and positivity of spirit in which our students and their supporters have engaged with these ceremonies to mark the completion of their time at Durham.

That they had reason to celebrate is testament to our students' determination, but also to the outstanding support that they have received during their studies in Durham, from those teaching and also those supporting teaching, in the Colleges and in wider professional services.

Just as we celebrate our collective successes, it continues to be important that we all work together through difficult times and manage renewed pressures where we can try to support one another.

Many of our final and continuing students are still awaiting all their marks and urgently need to receive them to conclude their degree. While 80% of our final year students have an interim or full degree, there are a significant minority who do not.

Getting our students graduated remains a top priority. In my Tuesday 27 June communication, I outlined ways we could achieve this.

I would ask we all give careful thought to what we can now do so that our students can take their next steps.

What we can try to achieve together at Durham

My colleagues in the Executive and I remain fully committed to engaging in constructive and forward-looking discussions at our own local level, and to working together to achieve positive outcomes for everyone as far as we possibly can.

Workload is a project to which we are committed. We are one of only a few institutions in the sector who are considering both academic and professional services workload. Staff will shortly be receiving an update from the Workload Steering Group. In addition to the managing equitable workloads, it is important that we address the factors that inflate the time taken to do things, such as simplifying some of our processes and adjusting perceived expectations that all aspects of workload are to be done with equal intensity at all times.

We understand the concerns about precarious employment in the sector. We continue to work constructively with our Trade Unions, using our agreed Casual Working Principles and considering other areas where we could make improvements. We have committed to consulting on a new approach to fixed term contracts, with a view to creating new Career Development fellowships.

We are now one of the leading universities for family friendly benefits, most recently amending our parental leave policy to ensure that staff are entitled to parental leave from the moment they join the University. We continue to see improvements in our gender pay gaps which, from an initial analysis of the data, has reduced to c. 19.5% (from 21.1% in 2022). We know there is much more to do here. We will also shortly be launching a Staff Hub with support and information for disabled colleagues, which has been developed in collaboration with the Staff Disability Network and the Trade Unions. We will continue to work hard in these areas to maintain the positive benefits for all our staff.

Importantly, we have agreed with DUCU that there is significant, further work we can undertake locally on the pay spine for academic staff. This follows the work we did to make permanent changes at the bottom of the pay spine in 2022, which resulted in a significant pay uplift for around 900 colleagues.

Further details of work undertaken in the last year to address issues of importance to our staff, including workload, gender pay gap and casualisation, can be found at [this link](#).

We trust that the renewed commitment to negotiations for this national level dispute will serve to ensure that we can move forward from what has been a very difficult period in the University's history.

I will continue to keep you updated.

With best wishes,

Karen

Professor Karen O'Brien
Vice-Chancellor and Warden