

This briefing provides information for you to understand the issues involved in the UCU strike.

**The UCU will be on strike on
20th–21st and 24th–26th February;
2nd–5th and 9th–13th March.**

Key Players & Key Terms

Key players:

- University and College Union (UCU): Trade union for uni workers, including professional services staff, academics and research students.
- Universities' UK (UUK): The representative body for universities across the UK. They are leading the negotiations with UCU about the amount employers and staff should pay into USS pensions.
- Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA): Represents universities in national negotiations with trade unions and other stakeholders. They decide the national pay scales.

Key terms:

- Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS): The pension scheme that staff above a certain grade at the University of Sheffield (and other pre-1992 universities) pay into. Also the name of the organisation that manages the pension pot.
- Casualisation: The increasingly common process of employing staff on precarious 'casual' contracts rather than on an annually-salaried basis.
- Retail Price Index (RPI): A way of measuring inflation by charting the cost of a shopping basket of standard goods each year. If wages are increasing 'below RPI,' pay is not increasing at the same rate as the cost of goods.

What is a strike?

A strike is when workers refuse to continue working because of an argument with an employer about working conditions, pay levels, or job losses. Strikes have also historically been about national issues - the weekend was won through strike action, for example.

What is a picket line?

A picket line is a form of protest which involves workers establishing a boundary, often at the entrance to their place of work, which other people are asked not to cross.

What is a trade union?

A trade union is an organised group of workers formed to protect and further their rights and interests. The University and College Union (UCU) represents teaching staff and some professional services staff at universities across the country.

How does the strike ballot work?

Fifty per cent of UCU members in each institution need to have voted in the ballot for it to be valid, with half of those voting supporting strike action. This threshold has been met at the University of Sheffield twice, once in 2018 and once in 2019, over the current issues. The ballots are live for 6 months.

Why is the UCU striking?

Pay

The pay offer in 2018/19 for most HE staff was yet again below inflation. The value of UCU members' pay has declined and continues to fall. Since 2009, the cumulative loss to pay (compared to rises in RPI) is over 20%, therefore they are demanding that employers increase staff pay by 3% plus RPI.

Workload

As early as 2016, 83% of academic staff in HE reported that their workload had increased and 26.9% of teaching assistants reported working over 60 hours per week. HE staff have some of the highest levels of burnout and stress. UCU believes that this must urgently be addressed.

Casualisation

Casualisation has become an increasing problem in higher education, with staff in insecure work without good reward schemes and training. Most universities continue to use hourly paid contracts for some teaching staff, and most universities rely on external contractors to deliver some part of their own services. UCU are calling this ballot to ensure that employers reduce the number of zero-hours and hourly paid positions.

Equality

UCU are asking for a nationally-agreed action for HE institutions to close the gender pay gap and to specifically address the racialised pay gap, taking account of the ways in which intersectionality affects pay and grading. Every year the official pay data in UK HE shows continuing and persistent pay inequality. At Sheffield, for example, in 2018 women were paid 89p for every £1 paid to men.

The USS Dispute

Currently, USS members pay 9.6 per cent of their salaries into the scheme. This is an increase from the 8% paid before 2018 strike action (up from 6.5% in 2011) and will see a typical lecturer paying £1,000 a year more for the same pension on retirement, compared to 2018. The increased costs of the pension are to cover a supposed deficit in the scheme, which the UCU claims is exaggerated by poor accounting methods.

It was the USS pension scheme that caused the strike action in 2018, when it was proposed to be changed from a 'Defined Benefit' scheme to a much riskier 'Defined Contribution' scheme - again due to dubious claims about a deficit in the scheme - which the UCU successfully resisted.

Compensation for Students

Students may be entitled to compensation for strike action. This is based on guidance from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA) who are an independent body responsible for student complaints. According to their guidance, students may have a case for compensation for missed learning and teaching where institutions have failed to take reasonable steps to protect learning outcomes.

For more information, see here: oiahe.org.uk/students/complaints-related-to-industrial-action/. For questions, complaints or queries not covered by University FAQ's, please email strike.advice@sheffield.ac.uk and if you would like to register your interest in seeking compensation find the SU's form here: bit.ly/2Hylj7U

Why is the SU supporting the strikes?

The Students' Union is supporting the strike because the marketising forces which are eroding staff working conditions are doing the same to students' learning conditions. In the past decade tuition fees have trebled to over £9,250 per year for home students, and even further for our international student community. Grants for the poorest students have been cut, rents have soared, and there is a student mental health crisis. This current model for higher education is turning universities into factories where education is a commodity, educators are exploited workers and students are consumers.

You may well feel angry. Staff are angry too. But make sure you direct your anger at those managing the universities, who have made the choices that have brought us to where we are now, and still have the power to change it.