

USSU Sabbatical Officers
Student's Union

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Dear Zamzam, Emily, Kobby, Jon-Connor and Famous,

Thank you for your letter. I do appreciate that this is a concerning time for the student body and want to reiterate that we are committed to ensuring that any disruption to your learning is minimised as far as possible.

To answer your specific points:

Question 1 – If this strike action is outside of the University's control what lobbying efforts have been made by the University to UUK to represent this institution's views in this dispute?

The University has been fully engaged in the consultation process with UUK. We have completed all the requisite questionnaires and have sought to provide additional contextual information that is directly pertinent to the business context at Salford. We have also sought to ensure that our voice is heard at other key events including the USS members meeting in December 2017, where Salford directly questioned the USS Chief Executive.

The University is mindful at all times of the potential impact on staff and students and has indicated to those involved in the consultation and negotiation process that it is important that an agreed outcome is reached as soon as possible. This, however, needs to be based on a solution which is fair and affordable for all parties and that is acceptable to the Pensions Regulator.

Question 2 – What steps have the University taken to avoid this strike action taking place?

As you are aware, this is a national dispute, over which the University of Salford has no direct control. Although USS has 350 member institutions, Salford was one of only 68 Universities that were balloted by UCU for strike action. A mandate to take strike action was achieved at 63 of the institutions. We respect the right of our staff to engage in peaceful protest, including strike action, and we know they will not have taken the decision to take action on this occasion lightly.

Our priority, as a University is to ensure that we do everything we can to minimise the disruption to your members, our students. We know that many students have concerns, which you have highlighted to us, about this strike and what this will mean for them and their studies. We have put a number of measures in place to minimise the impact of the strike action and it is our highest priority to make every effort to ensure students' studies are not unduly disrupted.

To ensure that there has been a balance of information available relating to Pensions, the University made information available to all colleagues in December 2017 and January 2018 to support them in making a balanced decision on whether or not to vote for strike action. It is our understanding that 51% of UCU members at Salford voted in support of strike action and action short of strike, therefore just meeting the 50% legal threshold.

We have worked with UCU locally to ensure that any action taken is peaceful and enables staff to exercise their right to take strike action, and for those staff that exercise their right to work to be able to do so. The decision to take strike action is a personal one and we understand that for many colleagues, who are committed to ensuring the very best student experience that this has and will continue to be a difficult decision.

Question 3 – We believe this is the 5th strike action taken by UCU at Salford in the past seven years with previous strikes being held in 2012, 2013, 2015, 2015. Given the regularity of strike action at the University which is the meaning of ‘exceptional’ in the context of the terms and conditions?

A number of strikes have been called by the Trade Unions in recent years. This has been done at a national level in relation to both the annual pay settlement and the pension triannual valuation giving rise to the need to revise member payments and benefits.

The decision to call members to take action is done by the respective trade union and is therefore beyond the control of the University. Prior to 2017, the results of the strike ballot were aggregated nationally, therefore resulting in all HEIs being impacted, irrespective of the views of the members at a local level. It is important to note that not all eligible staff are members of the Trade Union and at Salford density is currently circa 30%.

We do however seek to work alongside our recognised trade unions at a local level to mitigate the lasting impact of any industrial action taken. At a local level it is exceptional that we have had localised action. Please be assured that we will continue to work closely with the trade unions to ensure that local disputes are resolved without the need for further industrial action, and will continue to be engaged with consultation on national issues so that disputes here are resolved quickly.

Question 4 – What long term steps are being taken by the University to plan for, and avoid, future strike action?

As outlined above, we respect the right of our staff to engage in strike action, which is their right as trade union members. We also recognise the importance of having good working relationships with our trade unions and all colleagues to create an inclusive, effective and engaged University, focused on delivering the experience our students deserve.

In order to enhance these relationships we work with both recognised trade unions (UCU and UNISON) through our Joint Negotiating and Consultation Committee and our Policy Forum where we discuss key matters and involve them in improving the experience of our colleagues. We are also working with UCU directly through the Joint Academic Committee chaired by the Dean of Research to address matters relating to our academic colleagues, allowing discussions that are more detailed for this key colleague group.

We are also ensuring that we address the experience of all colleagues, as not all are trade union members, through our people and culture programme, which has recently received approval from the Campus Framework Board. This programme and other projects will allow us to improve the overall experience of our colleagues by addressing communication, engagement, leadership capability, reward and recognition needs.

We believe that these actions will enable a step change in the experience of our colleagues by working in partnership with them directly, as well as through their trade union representatives. We are however, unable to guarantee that there will be no further strike action.

Question 5 - What steps have been taken by the University to mitigate the adverse effects of the strike actions and to provide reasonable alternatives to students when teaching is cancelled?

As I'm sure that you can appreciate, it is difficult to predict the specific impact of industrial action across a university of our size, as trade union members are not required to tell us in advance if they are taking action. Once we are aware of disruption specific to particular modules and programmes we will work with staff at a School level to put in place plans for appropriate alternative learning experiences. It will take some time before we know exactly which learning activities have been impacted by the strike and so it is not yet possible to report on the mitigating steps. Our commitment remains that we will take all reasonable steps to ensure that any learning disrupted by the industrial action will be provided by other means or at another time.

Question 6 - For those students that use specialist equipment, including laboratory equipment, what provision will be made if it is not possible to reschedule taught sessions due to the specialist nature and requirements of the teaching?

As indicated in response to question 5 above, at this point it is too early to report of specific mitigating actions. You will be aware that not all lecturing or technical support staff are on strike and we will all that we reasonably can to ensure that specialist facilities remain available to support learning wherever that is safely possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'HJ Marshall', written in a cursive style.

Professor Helen Marshall
Vice-Chancellor

