

# VICKY BLAKE

democratise ◦ organise ◦ unite

## Candidate for UCU General Secretary 2024



### In this pack:

1. Formal election candidate statement
2. Full manifesto

Website: <https://vickyblakeucu.uk>

Email: [VickyBlakeUCU24@gmail.com](mailto:VickyBlakeUCU24@gmail.com)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/zenscara>

Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/vickyblake.bsky.social>

Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@zenscara>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/VickyBlakeUCU>

## Candidate Statement

This candidate statement will be included with formal ballot papers for the UCU General Secretary election, which opens on 25 January 2024 and closes on 1 March 2024.

### **Vicky Blake (University of Leeds)**

Contextual Outreach Lead Officer (Academic Related)

*vickyblakeucu.uk*

### **Democratise – Organise – Unite**

I have been active in UCU for 14 years, with experience at every level from a branch rep to UCU president. I am a genuinely independent candidate, and as General Secretary I will work to create a democratic, united, and organised UCU, built by and for our members.

Our union requires a significant shift in the culture and approach of our leadership. I want to spend time in branches across all parts of the UK, including the wealth of educational establishments where members have historically felt side-lined. I will work with lay democratic structures to foster constructive, deliberative discussion and equip members and committees with reliable information and support.

As General Secretary I will:

- **Be accountable** to members and the National Executive Committee as my employer
- **Ensure transparency** in decision-making structures, processes, and finances
- **Value democracy** by respecting our democratic structures and their decisions
- **Include, engage and empower members and committees** via reliable, effective communication and clear, timely legal and industrial advice
- **Foster collaboration and productive debate** to deter damaging infighting
- **Ensure proper resourcing of research** to back our organising work, political policy development, and lobbying
- **Overhaul** information management systems to support effective organising
- **Proactively listen to and support our equality standing committees**, who are vital in supporting our most marginalised members
- **Improve** the clarity and accessibility of our legal support system, in individual casework, and collectively in relation to test cases and legal challenges
- **Empower branches** to use equalities, health and safety, and employment law to campaign effectively, with guidance reflecting key differences across devolved nations and dependencies.
- **Embed sustainability and climate advocacy** into our bargaining agenda and union practices
- **Ensure that UCU models fair employment practices**, repairing industrial relations with our recognised staff union

My professional and union work have prepared me for the role of General Secretary. I work in widening participation at the University of Leeds, where I'm Secretary, a caseworker, and former branch President. I coordinate programmes with schools and FE colleges that support young people to navigate socioeconomic barriers to post-16 education. My day job helps me to understand the nexus of education policy between FE and HE, and this has directly informed my union work locally and as chair of the UCU Education committee.

Before local campaigning secured my permanent contract, I stitched together a decade of precarious fixed term, part time, and hourly paid academic and academic related posts in Durham and Leeds. I spoke to the *Guardian* about the toll of insecure work on precarious members in 2013 and in 2016, worked with Aditya Chakraborty to bring about UCU's first front page exposé of exploitation in the university sector.

From 2012–17 I chaired the Anti-Casualisation Committee. During that time, we secured formal representation of casualised members across UCU and the inclusion of job security (backed by robust data collection) in local and sectoral bargaining claims. We deliberately worked across UCU's factions to develop networks of casualised members and permanently employed allies, building common goals.

I carry the lessons from working across political divides in this campaign into every aspect of UCU work, including my perspective on industrial action strategy. Successes across Further and Higher Education remind us that this union can win when we work together, and our recent disputes had the potential to be the strongest they have ever been, with FE branches achieving victories made possible by members' graft and commitment, and HE securing two consecutive sector wide aggregate mandates. However, moments of inconsistent communication, confused decision-making, and abrupt changes in strategy have undermined these campaigns, and disappointing results in the latest rounds of FE and HE ballots have left many members disenchanted by the distance between campaign rhetoric and lived reality.

Maximising industrial leverage requires coordinated campaigning across branches, underpinned by practical support and greater development of regional and national networks. We need coherent industrial action planning which facilitates member engagement with our democratic structures, and encourages creative thinking grounded in solid research and legal advice. We must forge productive paths through disagreement rather than continuing to allow division to characterise UCU politics. This cannot be achieved by wishing away political divides or seeking to erase multiple perspectives. Handled well, disagreements are a source of problem solving, theory testing, and creativity. Recently we have missed opportunities to build in this way, only to see other unions succeed through employing strategies dismissed by UCU.

This balance has always defined my approach to leadership in UCU. As HE Vice President (2019–20) I chaired the Higher Education Committee and led two UK HE negotiation teams. I consistently

lobbied for better coordination of communication with members during this time, and the negotiation teams would collaboratively and democratically develop detailed analysis and recommendations for members, while remaining open to critical opinions and changes proposed by members. Neither the USS nor pay and conditions (“Four Fights”) disputes were entirely resolved during this time, but each progressed because our team was able to effectively leverage the direct impact of strike action through careful negotiations. We successfully established key forums for interrogating the dubious valuation methodology which was integral to the USS dispute, and in negotiations with UCEA, successfully brought our demands on pay related conditions into formal talks for the first time.

As President (2020–22) I chaired the National Executive Committee, Strategy and Finance Committee, International Working Group and UCU Congress. I represented UCU on the Trade Union Coordinating Group, which brings together 11 unions to campaign in and beyond Parliament. Via TUCG I directly contributed to early drafts of the Decarbonisation and Economic Strategy Bill, and collaborated on our responses to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, wider environmental work, and Covid-19. The trade union movement operates in an increasingly complex, hostile political context, making it vital to coordinate campaigns with political work for a just and sustainable education sector and society.

I am ready and qualified to put in the time and effort required to create, restore, and improve the structures that our union needs to focus on maximising our industrial strength and leverage.

A full list of my UCU roles appears below. You can learn more about me and my campaign on my website ([vickyblakeucu.uk](http://vickyblakeucu.uk)), including my full manifesto, which includes sections about the key challenges across post-16 education:

1. Union Democracy, Accountability, and Transparency
2. Organising and Recruitment
3. Industrial Strategy
4. Equality, Health and Safety in our workplaces
5. Job security
6. Influencing policy and the political landscape

## UCU service:

### UK level:

- UK Officer 2019–2023:
  - Vice President 2019–20
  - UK President 2020–22
  - Immediate Past President 2022–23
  - Chaired Strategy and Finance Committee and International Working Group, 2020–2022
- NEC, HEC: Casualised representative 2013–17; National representative 2017–19, 2023–25
- Education Committee: 2016–23; Chair 2018–19, 2023–24
- Climate and Ecological Emergency Committee: 2022–24; Co-Chair 2022–23
- Democracy Commission Co-Chair 2018–19
- Anti-Casualisation: 2011–17; Chair 2012–17
- Recruitment, Organising, Campaigns: 2013–18
- Academic Related, Professional Staff 2016–18; 2023–25
- Women Members 2011–13; 2016–17; 2018–19; 2023–25
- TUC delegate 2016, 2018–23
- Women's TUC delegate 2012, 2013, 2017, 2019, 2023

### Region:

- Yorkshire and Humber Regional HE Vice Chair 2023–24

### Leeds University UCU:

- Honorary Secretary 2023–24
- President 2017–19
- VP 2015–17
- Membership Officer 2014–15
- Committee 2012–present

### Durham UCU:

- Casualised organiser 2009–12
- Committee 2012

***Please see the next page for my full manifesto***

# VICKY BLAKE

democratise • organise • unite



## Manifesto

UCU General Secretary election 2024

# Introduction

I have been active in UCU for almost 15 years. This manifesto draws on my experience of working at every level of the union from casualised branch rep to UK President, and conversations with members across the whole post-16 education sector.

We face many challenges. Top-down, managerialist approaches do not serve staff or students well. We also face the reality of climate change and the growing impact of artificial intelligence on our work. Education unions and the experience and expertise of our members should be at the very centre of the design and delivery of education, training, and research, but this can only happen when we organise and lobby effectively to make it so. I will work to create a democratic, united, and organised UCU, built by and for our members.

In the past five years our union has increasingly been characterised by division, often on public display on social media platforms. Since the last General Secretary election, we have lost members and many members have lost faith. A new low was reached when industrial relationships between UCU staff represented by Unite UCU and the senior leadership broke down. UCU needs a significant shift in culture and approach to leadership in order to take on the challenges we face in the workplace and wider society, and win.

I am a genuinely independent candidate and I believe in working constructively through differences in the interests of members. In this document I set out how we can operate more effectively to win the changes we need in our workplaces, and how our union can do its part to shift the UK to progressive education policy and practice.

As General Secretary I will organise relentlessly for decent, equitable, safe, and secure jobs and workplace democracy. I will always give my all for UCU members.

In what follows I set out my priorities which focus on the practical changes we need to rebuild confidence as the strong and effective force we know we can be.

- 1) UCU Democracy and Decision-making**
- 2) Recruitment and Organising**
- 3) Industrial Strategy**
- 4) Equality, health and safety at work**
- 5) Job Security**
- 6) Influencing policy and the wider political landscape**

## Section 1

### UCU Democracy and Decision-making

#### Summary of key pledges

As General Secretary, I will:

**RESPECT DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES:** I will support and uphold the democratic structures of the union as laid down in our rules and standing orders. I will facilitate a productive relationship between the NEC (and its industrial subcommittees HEC and FEC) and UCU staff in driving forward and executing policy decided by members, subject to legal and moral accountability. At no stage will I attempt to undermine those structures, or the decisions made by them.

**IMPROVE HOW WE MAKE DECISIONS:** I am committed to increasing accountability and transparency in UCU. I will work with members and within our structures to identify where those structures are working well, and where there is a need for improvement, either in principle or in application.

**INFORM AND EMPOWER MEMBERS:** I will invest resources into our organising structures to facilitate organising work at branch, regional, and devolved national levels. During campaigns, I will ensure that members receive clear information about strategy, as well as the information they need to take a full part in decision-making.

**ENGAGE MEMBERS:** I will be visible and engaged with branches, regions, and the devolved nations, to routinely seek the views of members, elected reps, and staff, with a focus on determining how I – and UCU more broadly – can help practically support and facilitate their organising.

---

#### Democratic Structures

A key responsibility of the General Secretary is to ensure that our union's existing decision-making bodies and democratic structures function effectively, meaning members know how to engage with democratic decision-making in UCU, and can trust that these decisions will be implemented.

In recent years, it has often been difficult for members and branch committees to understand what is happening during important disputes and campaigns, and how different parts of the union interact. We have seen a proliferation of overlapping consultation mechanisms and decision-making bodies, and sometimes our existing democratic structures have been sidestepped. Members have reported that they feel as though they are being over-consulted via a confusing variety of platforms, but at the same time, decisions have been enforced without proper consultation.



As General Secretary I will make it a priority to re-establish trust in our decision-making structures. As part of this, I commit to respecting the democratic and decision-making structures of our union, and to respect and implement the decisions of members. There will be times when our decision-making structures lead to complex or seemingly contradictory situations, but I am committed to working with the elected officers, NEC members, branch representatives, and UCU staff to find a productive path through such difficulties.

It is also clear that some of our union's democratic structures require improvement. Some areas in need of work were highlighted by the work of UCU's most recent Democracy Commission which I co-chaired in 2018-19, and some have been brought to light as our union has taken part in more organising and industrial action. As General Secretary I will commit to a review and supporting and resourcing the necessary work to improve UCU's democratic accountability and transparency, and through this, restore members' trust.

Democratic process should not take place from the top down. I have ideas about how our structures might be improved, but it is members who must discuss and decide on these changes through proper democratic processes. I commit to working with members, elected reps, and UCU staff to identify places where our structures are working well, where they are fine in principle but need to be applied more consistently, and where there is a need for improvement. I will work with the NEC, as my employer body, to ensure that I am accountable to members.

### **Informing, empowering, and engaging with members**

We currently have a problematic disconnect between members (including local reps serving on branch committees) and the 'national union.' There is a sense of mutual distrust which is not a sustainable situation for a trade union or any collective organisation.

As a lay member and a long-serving branch officer I know that for members to feel able to participate fully in union decision-making, clear information is needed about what is at stake, in good time. Under pressure in fast moving industrial disputes this is more challenging, but I believe earlier and more regular engagement between head office and branches is needed to better support branch committees and officers in leading nuanced local discussions that consider the benefits and drawbacks of multiple possible approaches. I will prioritise improving communications, including better provision of detailed materials to inform decision making, and clear, effective routes for branch officers to raise specific queries and requests. I also pledge to use digital tools to supplement rather than side-step our existing democratic structures.

### **Creating better spaces for dialogue**

Effective member consultation cannot and should not be forced along a path chosen from the top down, because an effective strategy is always one that is rooted in what is happening on

the ground. **Branches must become the building blocks of our union** again, rather than being seen as outposts to implement top-down strategy. This is the unhealthy dynamic that has developed in recent years. I believe members need new mechanisms and spaces in which to express their views and listen to other positions in more informal settings to precede and complement formal decision-making.

One mechanism which I believe should return is the activist list, which used to be a space for UCU members to engage with each other. This list was very helpful at times as a space for sharing ideas and discussing strategy, and predictably, also a space for vehement disagreement at others. Whatever ways we might be able to encourage more productive debate and disagreement, unilaterally removing this space for member discussion – which was not on social media and out of full public view – was undemocratic. Democracy can mean criticism, particularly of the leadership. I am not afraid of this because I believe engaging with voices, including critical ones, enables us to arrive at stronger positions. As General Secretary, I will not isolate myself from the membership or surround myself only with people who agree with me. My role will always be to bring people together to find solutions rather than to sow further division.

### **Visibility and accountability**

I will ensure that I make myself available to branch and regional meetings, that I take part in forums where ideas and opinions can be expressed, and I will ensure that union communication is two-way. I commit to strengthening the role of branches, regions, and devolved nations, as spaces for forthright debate to develop and shape campaigns and industrial strategy. Regional committees are very undervalued at present, and I will consult widely so about how we can make better use of this space.

There are serious challenges inherent in consultation via deliberation and discussion. It takes time, and workload and the capacity to take part in discussion varies across members and at different times of year. The accessibility of different forms of meetings can also create barriers. While there is not one single solution to this, one concrete action that I commit to taking is to launch a union wide discussion of accessibility in branch meetings. To do this I will ensure branches are provided with resources and guidance developed with our equality standing committees on how to facilitate open discussion at branch meetings, and how to facilitate smaller, less formal discussion via branch reps networks, workplace meetings, and branch equalities networks.

(See **Recruitment and Organising** for information on proposed UCU Organising Hubs)

### **Sectoral decision-making**

Similarly, the NEC and its industrial subcommittees (FEC and HEC) need spaces to discuss strategy prior to making crucial decisions about industrial action, which is currently undertaken in short, high intensity debates. Some work to achieve this has been driven by members of

UCU's staff, and I pledge to work with staff and NEC members to continue to create spaces for them to discuss strategy prior to pressurised motion debates.

I believe that an effective General Secretary listens to all views and respects different political positions, traditions, and affiliations. It is important that we do not shut any individuals or groups out of our collective conversations or demonise or caricature the views of others, and this is the approach I have always taken to my work in UCU. From 2012–17 I chaired the Anti-Casualisation Committee. During that time, we secured formal representation of casualised members across UCU and the inclusion of job security (backed by robust data collection) in local and sectoral bargaining claims. We deliberately worked across UCU's factions to develop networks of casualised members and permanently employed allies, building common goals.

I intend to restore and protect the principle of a truly member engaged union where we can all take genuine ownership of decisions. If we can do this, we are much more likely to win.

---

## Section 2

### Recruitment and Organising

#### Summary of key pledges

As General Secretary, I will:

**CREATE A NETWORK OF UCU ORGANISING HUBS** to foster mutual learning and support between branches and across sectors, with structured organising support for branches to improve the continuity, coordination, and cumulative development of campaigns at local and sectoral levels. This will particularly benefit smaller branches that may not have access to local funds for paid organisers.

**INCREASE UCU'S INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH CAPABILITY** through expanding and developing in-house expertise. This UCU Research Unit will provide access to detailed industrial, financial, and political analysis to underpin targeted and effective strategies at local and sector level.

**CAMPAIGN TO IMPROVE LOCAL RECOGNITION AGREEMENTS AND FACILITIES TIME:** Organising work, recruitment, and campaign building takes time. One of my earliest priorities will be to build a cross-sector campaign with branches to address the insufficient (or non-existent) paid time for elected officers and reps who carry out union duties during working hours (backfilled 'facilities time') including for paid 'time-on' for reps employed on fractional or hourly paid contracts.

**DEVELOP AND MONITOR RECRUITMENT SUPPORT FOR BRANCHES** by undertaking an analysis of branch recruitment challenges across our branches and sectors. This will inform work to systematically develop strategies and practical support to overcome them, facilitated by Organising Hubs.

**OVERHAUL UCU DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS** to improve the efficiency of administrative processes and enhance our ability to interrogate membership data, which will free capacity for more effective organising and campaigning. This work will include a review to update UCU's casework handling system.

---

#### Coordination and support: UCU Organising Hubs

The most powerful organising distributes our skills and knowledge, to empower more members to use them. Coordinating campaigns and branch development with the support of Organising Hubs will create opportunities to bring members, ideas and best practice together. This will empower branch officers and activists by facilitating the development of campaigns with the benefit of shared experience, insights, and access to specialist advice, guidance, and structured organising support.

Organising Hubs would be important drivers of our work to secure binding collective sectoral bargaining where we do not yet have it because the coordination they promote will enhance our leverage on employers' representative bodies to enter into sector wide agreements that raise the bar for all employers, and in negotiations to implement any sector level deal at branch level.

This approach is also designed to reinforce key agreed recommendations contained in the 2023 PGRs as Staff campaign report, which highlighted lack of staff capacity as a major limiting factor for organising members. It will also help direct the support of regional and UK level capacity towards branches in a more structured way. Detailed campaign resources produced in advance by working with branches and appropriate elected committees can be adapted for sharing more widely. Coordination will maximise regional opportunities for building solidarity and support with local trades councils, political representatives, and working with other unions.

For more about how these hubs might specifically be deployed in improving our work. (See **Industrial Strategy** and **Job Security**)

### **Research to support organising**

Organising in an effective way requires us to understand a broad, interrelated set of financial, industrial, legal, and political interests. To improve UCU's ability to anticipate and challenge employers' responses to the changing legal and regulatory landscape, the centrally coordinated UCU Research Unit will systematically gather, analyse, and disseminate financial, industrial, legal, and political data relevant to our organising and campaigning work. This data will be made available publicly where appropriate, while taking care to protect industrially sensitive material.

### **Research to unravel financial and political relationships**

Widening the scope of our analytical work via the Research Unit will help us to identify and challenge patterns in financial and workforce data. This will include examining the financial and political relationships at stake between external consultancies and employers, and the increasing engagement of private providers to outsource areas of work to external organisations. The increasing reliance within the sector on costly external consultants is implicated in countless restructures and department closures, particularly in post-92 Higher Education institutions.

These processes are often opaque, and by the time formal statutory mechanisms are announced, branch reps often find themselves presented with a *fait accompli* by management. A widening separation between senior management teams and the daily reality of staff across post-16 education is reflected in a managerialist culture and erosion of internal governance. Better data and the more horizontal coordination of organising across the sector via Organising Hubs will empower branches and our industrial committees to comprehensively challenge poor decision-making by employers.

For more about how increased research capacity will support our work. (See **Industrial Strategy, Equality, health and safety at work** and **Influencing policy and the wider political landscape**)

## **Recruitment support**

Building our membership and improving our density of coverage is vital and must be understood as an **ongoing** project. Branches vary greatly in capacity and confidence across UCU and therefore may need more tailored support, but all branches will benefit from opportunities to share problems and resources. I will ensure that comprehensive support for branches is developed, including materials that identify targeted strategies for approaching a range of issues. For example, an early piece of work will be to develop clear guidance for branches to rebut employers' incorrect deployment of GDPR concerns when trying to avoid sharing with UCU the contact information for staff in our bargaining group who are eligible for membership.

Recent reliance on short duration campaigns and social media has not and cannot achieve success in this area. Members need to feel engaged with UCU, and that it is relevant to their everyday working lives. Demonstrating our relevance as a union must involve understanding that recruitment drives will need to differ according to context. A very different approach will be needed to recruit across 'atomised' workplaces where (for example) adult and community educators work across numerous locations, versus a college department with high existing levels of membership, versus a team of IT specialists in higher education who work in hybrid arrangements or largely from home.

Recruitment and organising must go hand in hand. I will make sure that good guidance is developed alongside sharing of resources and ideas across branches and through rep networks. This, along with access to advice from UCU staff, will help structure campaigns around the needs of members in a unit or branch, to promote recruitment to UCU alongside organising to win tangible improvements to members' conditions.

Assisting branches to develop or expand local networks for reps will be key to increasing confidence and therefore organising capacity, and connection with members. Guidance and practice will be reviewed regularly via feedback from branches. I will also work with UCU staff and members to overhaul and review UCU's practices with physical media and single use materials, to better reflect our green bargaining agenda.

## **Increasing organising capacity and improving systems**

Organising and the representation of members takes time but access to employer funded paid time for union work (backfilled facilities time) is often inadequate for branches' needs, or even denied altogether. To increase our organising capacity, I commit to:

- coordinating cross-institutional networks of reps at region and sector level

- developing centrally provided campaign resources, developed together with members via the new Organising Hubs
  - launching a union-wide initiative to support negotiations for increased facilities time and for paid 'time-on' for members on hourly paid and fractional contracts
  - Initiating a project to thoroughly review and update UCU data management systems to improve the efficiency and accuracy of many administrative processes we rely on and to empower branch committees to get on with organising
-

## Section 3: Industrial Strategy

### Key pledges

As General Secretary, I will:

**BACK MEMBERS IN EVERY DISPUTE** by doing everything in my power to organise to win. I will work with all relevant committees, staff and negotiators to make sure communications about our strategy and options are clear to members at every stage.

**ORGANISE TO SECURE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING** through coordination of our organising at local level to build industrial power and drive our sectoral claims, within a coherent central UCU political and organising strategy.

**RESPECT, EQUIP, AND SUPPORT NEGOTIATORS** with timely information and analysis, renewed structures, and communication channels to connect them with members so they can deliberate and formulate tactics to win. I will reinstate and update bargaining advisory and support structures for branches to safeguard minimum standards at local level.

**LEARN FROM AND AMPLIFY LOCAL WINS** by allocating resources to understand and record what worked and why in each context and using that information to draw out general principles and tactical ideas that could be adapted to assist other branches in dispute.

**ENSURE BETTER SUPPORT FOR BRANCH COMMITTEES** both during disputes and in the daily work of representing members. This will include clear lines of contact to receive appropriate and timely support for issues at branch and sector level, and clear channels for branches to represent their members in decision-making in all disputes.

**DEVELOP A REPOSITORY OF BRANCH EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE** that branches can access to support every aspect of their work. This long-term project will include developing union-wide networks and resources within, and to complement UCU Organising Hubs.

**PUSH FOR BETTER TRADE UNION REPRESENTATION** in decision-making and governance structures that affect the working lives of our members, for example: on further education college governance boards and university councils and senates; funding bodies; research councils: and equality initiatives.

---

### Using every lever to win

The model of post-16 education in the UK is broken. Government underfunding cannot excuse employers' mismanagement. Winning requires UCU to respond with a coherent industrial and



political strategy. Every action undertaken and campaign pursued by members must be effective in furthering our aims, across all levels from branch to devolved nation to UK level.

I have used this section to outline what is needed for UCU to make better decisions about industrial strategy. As General Secretary I will facilitate creating a coherent strategy to which every member and branch can fully contribute.

### **Where members are in dispute with employers, I will back them with everything I have.**

I have a long track record of hard work as a lay member and lay President in UCU. While the role of GS differs importantly, the motivations I have will remain the same: I want UCU to be a union led by members, for members to win in workplaces across post-16 education. A General Secretary has a duty to respect and uphold union democracy and ultimately, to drive forward the implementation of members' collective decisions.

Members in dispute need to have confidence that a range of strategy and tactical options will be comprehensively explored before decisions are made by sector committees or votes at formal branch meetings. To enable members and elected representatives to be able to meaningfully consider options, I will ensure that they receive detailed and accurate legal and political information about industrial strategies, and risks to consider, in advance.

To win, our members need clarity in our aims in every campaign and dispute, and for us to forge constructive and productive paths through disagreement on strategy and tactics. I will never sidestep our democratic structures, instead my focus will be to build trust and improve how we work together. (See **UCU Democracy and Decision-making**.)

### **Organise to secure collective bargaining**

Collective bargaining in practice only has partial coverage in higher and further education. This means significant portions of our bargaining have to be pursued locally. Rather than accept this direction of travel we need to frame our strategy as 'defend and extend' collective sectoral bargaining agreements at sectoral and national levels (for example the post 92 HE contract) and improve conditions for our members through **coordinated** local bargaining that **reinforces** our collective objectives.

It is a mistake to view and conduct local bargaining as a substitute for sector level bargaining, or to see these mechanisms as in opposition. We demand a set of core standards that every employer should observe as a minimum. This is both reasonable and fundamental to the long-term health of education. As we fight for sectoral standards, we need to focus on securing real improvements in the workplace through all means open to us: the more wins we accrue locally, the more we increase pressure on other employers to follow suit.

I will encourage branches to coordinate local campaigns to win for their members **and** build the leverage and momentum we need to secure effective collective sectoral bargaining agreements

and arrangements. New UCU Organising Hubs will help branches to collaborate on similar campaigns at the same time, the sharing of best practice, and collaboration between higher and further education branches. (See **Recruitment and Organising**)

### **Respecting negotiators, ensuring they have the necessary tools and support**

In order to get the best they can for members, negotiators at every level of UCU need responsive support and the ability to review and analyse information quickly, as well as the ability to make recommendations via the appropriate democratic channels. I am a current branch negotiator at the University of Leeds, and I led UK HE negotiations in the pay and conditions (Four Fights) and USS disputes as UK Vice President in 2019/20, so I understand first-hand how invaluable good support structures and communication are, and how much hard graft elected lay negotiators put in on behalf of members. I will prioritise UCU assistance for negotiators elected at sector or national level to negotiate facility time / release.

I will respect the democratic duty of negotiators to pursue wins based on member-led policy positions. Where appropriate, as GS I will participate in negotiations, attend briefings and debriefings with the elected lay negotiation team and abide by collective responsibility. I will ensure appropriate space and support (including access to hybrid meeting technology) for negotiation teams to deliberate strategy and tactical options, recognising these discussions are often conducted under intense pressure. It is important that we develop mechanisms for negotiators to access timely expertise across UCU's membership and engage with members across communities and job types to better understand members' experiences. Importantly, I will ensure negotiators have access to appropriate channels to exercise their democratic responsibility to report to members they represent.

### **Support for local negotiations**

In recent years, branch committees have reported a lack of sustained support when negotiating locally and when taking part in sector disputes. To reverse this trend, I will restore central support for branches in local negotiations, to safeguard basic standards for local agreements. The Further Education Ratification Panel does this job in FE, and I will examine how its reach can be extended, to rebuild collective standards across the sector. Elections to the Higher Education Ratification Panel (RatPan) have not been called for several years, exposing branches to employers who want to ignore the standards set in the Framework Agreement. This agreement should be the basic minimum for the sector and its details matter. Through elected committees and UCU Organising Hubs, I will also instigate work to ensure the update and regular review of branch checklists and core standards for local deals. Operating in this connected way will help us avoid any 'race to the bottom' tactic from employers and will boost branches' leverage in negotiations. This attention to detail will make a notable difference.

## **Learn from and amplify local wins**

Branches engaged in successful organising across UCU find it surprisingly difficult to share their experiences through formal channels. Sometimes member communications or press communications highlight selected wins, but opportunities to build momentum more widely are routinely missed, with no space made to share practical details or answer dynamic questions. It should be the norm that gains and wins obtained by UCU branches are solidified into learning points for other branches and for our elected industrial committees at sector and national levels.

I will ensure that we use our regional committees and the network of UCU Organising Hubs (see **Recruitment and Organising**) to share and celebrate branch wins, **and** to stitch them into the fabric of our organising. This will be achieved by allocating resources and time to help a branch communicate how leverage was identified and exploited, and to explore learning points about what worked and why – and how did branches determine what was not working early enough to pivot away from those tactics? By routinely interrogating these questions we can create innovative strategies for bargaining and campaigns at all levels of UCU.

In light of recently established policy from the annual HE and FE sector conferences based on learning from locally successful tactics during industrial action, I will also initiate work to develop recommendations for the establishment of **strike committees** designed to increase democratic participation in industrial action, without limiting our union's ability to build and exercise maximal leverage.

## **Better support for branch committees**

Our industrial strategy cannot be separated from how we organise and build our branches. In recent years there has been significant confusion about the role branches are expected to play in decisions about industrial strategy. As a former UK officer, I am also aware of frustrations at some branches about difficulties in accessing information about UCU's local industrial action procedures and delays in responses to requests for approval of industrial action plans, or what information is required in the application.

I will engage with branch committees to ensure UCU understands what they need and what is helpful or unhelpful in dispute-related processes. I will ensure branch committees regularly receive the information and materials they need in advance of key decision-making moments about collective disputes at sector level. I will also establish a clear route to raise questions and provide information or intelligence about employer behaviour that is relevant to the dispute or campaign at hand.

We have mechanisms to inform decision-making during disputes that need to function alongside Sector Conferences: Branch Delegate Meetings and Branch Briefings. Restoring these requires serious work, so branch delegates can make fully informed decisions in a

democratic manner. I will ensure that members receive the full information they need in clear communications, and that decisions are respected and implemented.

Making the changes I describe in **UCU Democracy and Decision-making** and **Recruitment and Organising** will facilitate earlier and more regular engagement between UCU's central teams and branches. This engagement is essential to better support branch committees and officers in leading nuanced local discussions that consider the benefits and drawbacks of any course of action. It will enable branch committees and officers to lead local discussions and will make it easier for branch officers to raise specific queries and requests.

### **Formulating effective branch claims, building good strategies**

Returning to a democratically informed industrial strategy means ensuring UCU can engage effectively with members from branch through to sector level and at all stages of a dispute, including the process of formulating claims on which it rests. It means improving our decision-making structures, and the information we provide through them in good time, so they are timely and fit for purpose during high stakes action. (See **UCU Democracy and Decision-making**)

Effective strategy means understanding where we have leverage and where trends are evolving. To do that, we need to map jobs and contract types as well as conditions across our membership. It also requires having good information about our employer(s). UCU's ability to support branches with detailed employer profiles has seriously diminished due to the disappearance of the longstanding UCU Bargaining Information System. This system gave branches detailed information about their employers which meant branches often knew their employers' operations and workforce data better than they did. Equipped with that information, branches could set the agenda in local bargaining, and UCU was able to build the strategy that saved defined benefit pensions in 2018.

By resourcing the expanded research provision and Organising Hubs described in **Recruitment and Organising** I will reinstate and update the UCU Bargaining information System, helping negotiators and branches to ensure a solid basis to local claims, and to the development of our sectoral and national claims. Based on reliable data, we will be better able to develop our industrial strategy to win by discovering the effect of withdrawing our labour, at different times and in different ways, to ensure that our industrial action has maximum impact.

This approach will also support UCU in embedding climate demands into our bargaining agenda. As a founding member and co-chair of the Climate and Ecological Emergency Committee, I know that progressive work on Green New Deal claims in some branches must be replicated and coordinated at scale across our union, and at sector level.

## **Developing a bank of branch experience and expertise**

Some member-led networks have demonstrated the power of collaboration between branches, for example via branch twinning to support getting the vote out in recent HE ballots. After University of Liverpool UCU defeated compulsory redundancies in 2021, they shared their tactics and strategy through informal networks. Their methods helped to sustain the Marking and Assessment Boycott in many branches in 2022, forcing employers to give ground, despite the fragmentation of an all-branch strategy.

To make sure we keep hold of and can develop and share lessons learned across UCU branches, I will develop union-wide networks and trial real-time and asynchronous modes of mutual learning, to reinforce work emerging from UCU Organising Hubs. I reiterate my commitment to finding the best way to reinstate and update the UCU activist (email) list which facilitated significant mutual peer support across UCU and was unhelpfully withdrawn in 2023.

## **Governance: a call for workplace democracy**

Workers should have direct representation on all governance structures and decision-making bodies making decisions that affect their working lives. These structures include college governance boards; research councils; funding bodies; equality initiatives such as Athena Swan, Disability Positive, the Race Equality Charter Mark, and more. This form of representation is a great source of industrial strength because workers should be part of **making** the decisions. We need to reverse the erosion of staff representation in the governance structures of our institutions.

In the past, UCU Scotland has campaigned on reform of governance and was instrumental in developing the Higher Education (Scotland) Act (2016), which moved Scottish universities towards a more democratic model of governance. We can use this structure as a model and seek to extend this approach to the whole UK and to all of the sectors we represent.

I believe that the representation on governing bodies is a lever UCU has not pressed hard enough thus far. We should ensure that the voices of the people doing the work are also central to decision making in our workplaces. We must campaign for workplace democracy, challenging the removal of elected positions on University Councils; pushing for UCU representation on Governing Bodies in further education; lobbying funding bodies to stipulate significantly improved minimum standards for research contracts and to recognise PGRs as staff, on proper salaried pay.

---

## Section 4: Equality, health and safety at work

### Summary of key pledges

As General Secretary, I will:

**EMBED INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE PRACTICE IN UCU** by actively listening and working alongside members to combat racism and ensure unlearning of ableism, homophobia, transphobia and sexism are central to UCU's culture, practice, and training provision.

**INCREASE CAMPAIGNING FOR EQUITABLE AND SAFE WORKPLACES** by demanding that employers directly combat structural oppression and discrimination: we will relentlessly pursue fair, accessible, and safe working conditions for our members.

**DEVELOP OUR EVIDENCE BASE** to bolster and expedite robust campaigns and negotiation strategies to secure best workplace practices that promote equality and equity. Minimal interpretations of statutory responsibilities are never enough.

**IMPROVE OUR LEGAL PROVISION** by initiating a review of the UCU legal scheme to form recommendations to improve access to support for members in critical and stressful situations that require timely advice.

**IMPROVE ACCESS TO RAPID SUPPORT FOR MIGRANT MEMBERS** via a dedicated mechanism which can respond to urgent deadlines including visa issues or threats of deportation.

**SUPPORT NETWORK BUILDING FOR MINORITISED COMMUNITIES** by working with elected members and staff to make participation in our democratic structures accessible for all communities across the diversity of our membership.

---

### Embedding accessibility and inclusive practice

Equality is a practice, reflected in how we communicate, organise campaigns, and conduct meetings and events. As a union we must combat racism, and ensure **unlearning** of ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and sexism are central to our union's culture, as well as our workplaces. I commit to protecting the democratic structures of our union, and to complement them by creating new deliberative spaces outside of formal meetings for informed discussion ahead of decision-making meetings and processes. UCU's current over-reliance on social media platforms for communications excludes many members, others are actively deterred from engaging with getting involved in what can feel like an unwelcoming and highly sectarian

culture. We must support every members' participation in an inclusive, respectful, and comradely environment.

I will develop further support for branches, elected representatives, and the leadership team to meet members' needs. This will include guidance on: how to organise accessible meetings and events; enacting reasonable adjustments; and working to establish a ring-fenced fund to support accessible meetings (for example, with BSL interpretation) and events where branches would struggle to meet these costs. I also commit to ongoing development of our training and continuing professional development provision, and to formalising and improving annual Equalities training for the NEC and leadership team.

### **Safe and equitable workplaces**

Safety is a fundamental issue in our workplaces and organising spaces, from physical demands to the traumatic effects of bigotry, sexual harassment, and abuses of power. The financial model underpinning our sector is designed to extract the maximum work from fewer staff, often via insecure contracts. Minoritised, casualised, and PGR members are too often disproportionately affected by risks in our workplaces and experience more barriers in their careers.

The long-term impacts are only too familiar. I will propose that UCU updates and scales up or expands our 'workload is a health and safety issue' project. Our routine demands must include good organisational stress risk assessments and working practices compatible with physical and psychological well-being. I will also work with staff and elected committees to redouble UCU's efforts to promote use of the protected statutory facilities time available for health and safety work. This will integrate with our **Recruitment and Organising** work by increasing rep capacity and will increase members' awareness of the protections and limitations of Health and Safety law for the workplace.

Our deeply unequal and exclusionary workplaces will only improve when we organise to force employers into measurable improvements in our working lives. As one example: enhanced shared parental leave is not yet a right in every workplace or for every staff group, and contractual leave is not fully accessible to migrant members (including PGRs). Tackling this issue will require a campaign with significant planning and resources but will be more effective as a result of branches coordinating via Organising Hubs.

### **Pandemic risks and climate change**

Covid-19 continues to damage the health of many staff and students across our sector, causing and worsening many long-term health conditions. Last year, the World Health Organisation announced that one in ten Covid-19 infections are expected to lead to Long Covid. Climate change increases the risk of future pandemics with equally devastating impacts, with disabled members more at risk. I believe trade unions should be actively involved in anticipatory and emergency planning for future events and will argue strongly for adequate protections in our

workplaces and union organising spaces to ensure good air quality and physical and organisational mitigations appropriate to infection levels.

I equally commit to addressing issues such as bullying, sexual harassment and abuses of power in our workplaces as health and safety concerns. We know for example the significant impacts of exercises such as Ofsted and the REF on mental health (see also **Influencing policy and the wider political landscape**).

### **Developing our evidence base**

Members know their lived experience; minoritised members know better than anyone else the real obstacles to progression and promotion. The most important assessments of practice in a workplace should examine the issues members encounter in daily life. However, market metrics and assessment exercises tend to miss these realities, and all too often exacerbate inequality. Official assessment exercises become a means to reinforce rather than challenge discrimination.

Branches and sector committees will be supported to develop strong demands for employers to anticipate and mitigate the unequal impact of assessment exercises and other policies backed by UCU's own analyses of equality data via the expanded UCU Research Unit (described in **Recruitment and Organising**). The development of Organising Hubs across UCU will further reinforce our commitment to amplify the voices of minoritised members. This model will help us to coordinate strategy, and to turn policy into practice and run effective campaigns.

This deeper analysis of employers' operations in combination with the more horizontal coordination of organising promoted by hubs will help branch reps, member-led groups, and our elected committees to develop connected campaigns for equity, equality, and liberation. For example, this connected approach across our sector will reinforce our work in understanding how we can challenge and address the harms caused by far-right activity across campuses and on social media, and how to challenge claims that free speech is at risk if students and staff exercise their right to non-violently protest events or invited speakers (particularly attacks on the right to defend trans people in our communities). This approach will also support our work to counter the erosion of academic freedom in relation to support for causes such as Palestinian rights, Black Lives Matter, and decolonising the curriculum.

### **Improve our legal provision**

I will initiate a review of the legal scheme including gathering the views of members who have accessed it, and the views of branch reps and regional and national officials. The review will focus on determining how we can provide better guidance and support for members, often in critical and highly stressful situations. Minoritised members express frustration in accessing our legal scheme and relevant advice. Feedback indicates that this is not always experienced as supportive, particularly by disabled, Black and migrant members. Our union has often tended to be risk averse in using legal frameworks and the Equality Act 2010 to advance the collective



interests of members. I commit to further explore how we can better draw upon the law in individual casework and collectively via test cases and legal challenges, in line with UCU policy formed at Congress.

Regular guidance for branches will include up-to-date information on relevant legislation, analysis of relevant case law, and specific advice on the implications of political and policy decisions for the groups of members they affect; this will be produced to reflect key differences across devolved nations and dependencies.

### **Supporting network building for minoritised communities**

Racism must be tackled head on, within our union as well as our workplaces. Within FE and HE, legitimised forms of discrimination proliferate: Prevent is routinely used to target Black and minority ethnic staff and students. Disabled, Black and minority ethnic members are disproportionately represented in disciplinary and formal procedures. Self-organising and network building in UCU has traditionally driven significant progress in terms of representation and advocacy for all communities within our diverse membership. I will work with all Equality standing committees, engaging with self-organising communities across UCU to identify and remove barriers to participation in our democratic structures. The review to which I commit in **UCU Democracy and Decision-making** will also inform the development of practical strategies to improve the representation of FE, HE, adult and community education, and prison education members in our equality work.

This will involve opening clear channels of communication for any minoritised group seeking to organise together, perhaps through use of moderated email lists, or accessing support to organise and host meetings. I commit to exploring every avenue to ensure groups and communities such as carers, members from faith-based communities, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are supported to build networks and contribute to developing our policy and campaigning activities.

### **Rapid support for migrant members**

Migrant members often face extremely urgent pressures and deadlines that our current legal scheme struggles to meet. I commit to detailed work to establish mechanisms for more rapid access to specialist support and legal advice. This will bring together elected reps and committees, migrant members across UCU, and staff, to scope and establish a new **dedicated response mechanism better able to support migrant members** facing visa complications or the threat of deportation.

Migrant members face significant additional financial and administrative burdens to work in the UK but are not afforded all the same rights. We have a duty to move quickly and responsively in developing guidance and advice on the range of issues migrant members face and keeping it up to date. These issues include immigration fees, the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), salary requirements, barriers to a family life, and threats of deportation. It is just as important

that our broader communications include migrant members' concerns and make clear to all members and branches where specialised advice differs according to migration status (for example with respect to industrial action).

More than 30% of UK higher education staff are migrants, and a significant proportion of FE staff have migrated to the UK. We must commit to developing structures which will enable education workers and their families to move between education systems in different countries, with full recognition of their knowledge and experience. I commit to amplifying the campaign to eliminate all costs related to movement, whether at government level, or through employers covering the cost of work permits, visas, and health charges.

I am committed to and will resource the sustained work required to win better and safer workplace conditions and to promote equity in education and wider society. I am fully committed to the detailed and responsive work it will take for us to become the more inclusive, accessible, and equity driven union our members need.

---

## Section 5: Job Security

### Summary of key pledges

As General Secretary, I will:

**DEVELOP A UCU SECURE JOBS CAMPAIGN** to bring together elected committees, staff, and members across post-16 education, supported by the UCU Organising Hubs and UCU Research Unit (described under **Recruitment and Organising**).

**CONSOLIDATE OUR SKILLS AND RESOURCES** to strengthen, further coordination and resourcing of our anti-casualisation work, including an analytic review of casework trends and legal strategy.

**SIMPLIFY MEMBERSHIP OPTIONS** for members working on multiple contracts and/or across multiple institutions, and with changeable incomes.

**ORGANISE IN OUTSOURCED, PRIVATISED AND NON-MAINSTREAM WORKPLACES**, drawing lessons from successes to instigate a systematic approach to recognition and bargaining.

**EMBED PARITY FOR PGR MEMBERS** and the principles of our ongoing 'PGRs as Staff' campaign in UCU's representative structures and internal culture.

**PRIORITISE IN-HOUSE SECURE WORK OPPORTUNITIES** and career development pathways for our union's staff, because as a union we must also exemplify our values as a trade union employer.

---

### UCU members must never be asked to put job security on the back burner

Job security is fundamental to our bargaining strategy. The increase of precarious, insecure, and atypical contracts across the sector is a direct result of marketisation and the introduction of a business model to education but it is **not inevitable**. Short-term and insecure contract types enable employers to cut costs and weaken workplace rights, extracting more from us for less job security and less pay. Casualisation includes increased use of outsourcing, agency staff, and worker (rather than employee) contracts with fewer rights.

Reduced access to career development and progression, and increased pressure to undertake unpaid additional work are common experiences across a range of job types. This contributes directly to the decline in pay and conditions for staff employed on a permanent and salaried basis. Insecure contracts exacerbate unsafe workloads and disproportionately affect

minoritised members. Casualisation often strains personal relationships, constrains life choices, and has a negative impact on parents and carers. Tackling job security is essential from both a social justice perspective and an industrial perspective, in terms of our fight for equity, better pay and conditions across the board.

Insecure employment models also contribute to the climate crisis, for example through excess carbon produced by workers forced to commute long distances for short contracts, or regular travel between multiple employers, and through reduced opportunities to train in and practise lower carbon techniques.

UCU must refute any notion that job insecurity is 'inevitable.' Our employers choose to 'Uberise' the sector, reducing secure and decent jobs in favour of short-termist gig economy solutions which fail education workers, our students, and our wider communities.

### **Improve resourcing and support for anti-casualisation work**

UCU Organising Hubs will make structured support more accessible for branches to tackle casualisation and facilitate mutual learning between branches, and across further and higher education, prison education and adult and community education. Support from peers and UCU staff will particularly benefit branches with fewer resources to identify and recruit insecurely employed members, and branches with more transient memberships owing to high levels of casualisation. The union will improve branches' access to our collective expertise in negotiating technically complex issues of casualisation and precarity. I will reinstate and update support structures for branches negotiating agreements involving hourly paid staff. This will help branches to avoid the known traps and pitfalls that arise when negotiating improved contracts, including the process of converting hourly paid to fractional contracts. This experience has been hard-won and needs to be disseminated to branches much more effectively.

### **Improve coordination of casework information and legal strategy**

Branches will be equipped to more effectively locate and support members who have a case for permanency. I will also initiate work to identify trends in casework for members employed on insecure contracts as part of the **UCU Secure Jobs Campaign**. Input will be sought from our elected committees, Organising Hubs, and UCU staff across the UK, to collate and coordinate appropriately anonymised casework information. Analysis of these trends will facilitate data-driven improvements to our guidance and training for branches and caseworkers. It will also inform work connected to a wider review of UCU's legal scheme (described under **Equality, health and safety at work**) and proposals to develop our legal strategy including the identification of test cases designed to expose employers to risk of sanctions.

### **Parity for PGRs**

I will work with the NEC to fully implement recent policy for PGRs, and to embed the principles of our ongoing 'PGRs as Staff' campaign in UCU's representative structures, practices, and

wider culture. I will work with committees and PGR groups to ensure the diversity of PGR experiences are reflected in the work of the UCU Secure Work Campaign, including the reduced access to funding and lack of access to parental leave for many migrant PGRs. We will explore mechanisms to promote accessible opportunities for mutual learning and support, and for wider UCU to learn from the notable successes won through PGRs' organising methods.

### **Simplify UCU membership options**

As part of my commitment to support PGR members and members on insecure contracts, I will initiate work with our NEC and staff to engage with members who work on multiple contracts at one or more institutions, or whose pay varies significantly across the year. The output of this review will be recommended proposals to simplify membership for members in this position. This will ensure they are fully protected in all relevant workplaces and improve membership density. I was involved in creating UCU's policy for transitioning to subscription levels proportional to income and will continue to support ongoing work to implement this.

### **Organise in outsourced/privatised and non-mainstream workplaces**

Increasingly, private providers and bogus subsidiaries of larger institutions employ staff on worse pay and often hyper-casualised conditions. Similar conditions are often found in adult and community education which may be provided directly by local authorities or delivered in non-mainstream institutions (including third sector provision). Working with elected committees, I will instigate a systematic approach to recruitment, branch formation and securing recognition in outsourced and privatised workplaces. This work will be directly informed by successful in-sourcing campaigns, and successes in recognition campaigns and subsequent bargaining in several existing outsourced UCU branches across post-16 education.

### **Secure work and improved career development opportunities for UCU staff**

As part of my commitment to rebuilding relationships between UCU leadership and the staff union, UNITE, I will work with them to ensure that all staff get the opportunity and training to develop their skills, interests and expertise via in-house secure work opportunities, training opportunities and better career development pathways.

I commit to work with the staff union to honour UCU's policy objectives for our own members within our employment arrangements for staff, including making permanent roles the norm and respecting UCU's policy that (apart from in very specific circumstances such as maternity cover) contracts should not be shorter in duration than 24 months. I will also do all I can to fulfil UCU's duty to develop specialist expertise in-house. On occasions where our staff need to partner with or commission external work (for example in the engagement of actuaries) this will follow fair and transparent tendering procedures agreed with UNITE.

Finally, I will ensure that all recruitment procedures within UCU are transparent, fair, and conducted according to the full letter and spirit of the policies we pursue for our members. I believe that our union must be a bastion of good practice, so we can securely tell our employers to do the same.

---

## Section 6:

### Influencing policy and the wider political landscape

#### Key pledges

As General Secretary, I will:

**ADVOCATE FOR POST-16 EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AS ANCHOR INSTITUTIONS:** Education institutions are a core part of the social and economic fabric of our society, but our employers and governments are not treating them this way. I will support the coordination of UCU branches in an area or city region to facilitate joint working initiatives with trades councils, other trade unions, devolved administrations, local authorities, and employers via good employment charter initiatives, to further our industrial aims.

**REBUILD LINKS WITH POLICY MAKERS AND THE MEDIA:** UCU should proactively shape the direction of policy initiatives that impact our members rather than via reactive dialogue with policy makers and campaigning. We will foster sustained dialogue on policy areas relevant to our members and build links with local, regional, devolved and UK government levels to maximise our chances of influencing policy decisions before they are made.

**WIDEN ACCESS TO UCU'S POLITICAL ANALYSIS:** through the expanded scope of the UCU Research Unit, to ensure branches, and regional and devolved national structures can access the detailed information they need to understand and engage with the developing political and policy landscape. (See **Recruitment and Organising**)

**FORMALISE AND DEVELOP OUR INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY WORK:** Global conflicts and climate change mean that it has never been more important for trade unions across the world to support each other. I will work to reinvigorate our links with education unions internationally to create joint campaigns for collective action, as we all fight for our respective memberships and communities.

---

#### Anchor Institutions: joint working and a Just Transition

We need to use every tool at our disposal to ensure that the economic and life changing impact of our work is recognised and properly valued. Post-16 education has the power to transform lives and communities through training, education, and research, but also as major employers. Education workers equip students with the knowledge, skills, and creativity needed for our society to flourish.

Our workplaces are anchor institutions in every town and city and are integral to the type of community wealth building that can ensure a just transition to a green economy. The systematic erosion of our pay and conditions stretching back fifteen years continues to

damage workers and communities, precisely because education is essential to local, regional, and national economic and cultural well-being.

In the city region of Greater Manchester, the Good Employment Charter recognises the significance of joint working initiatives between employers, trade unions, and local government. It sets out some core principles necessary to elevate employment standards – including decent pay, job security, access to flexible work, healthy workplaces, and employee engagement. An evaluation of responses from workers and managers in 2022 presents an overall positive impression of the difference made by the GEC, with clear interrelated recommendations for further improvements. Similar initiatives operate in the West of England, and in the Yorkshire combined authorities. We need to argue for progressive development and adoption of initiatives like these across our regions and nations. I will bring together a member-led political campaign to argue for the value of joint working between workers, learners, trade unions, local authorities and city regions, and devolved governments. This campaign will reflect the unique local contexts in which our branches exist.

A political campaign to recognise post-16 education institutions will require relationship building with trades councils and local employers, as well as politicians, think tanks and research groups. It will require that we fundamentally assert the need for a new funding model for Higher Education and massive investment in Further Education and Adult and Community Education, and in the provision of Prison Education. To do this well, our work will need to bring together our members across sectors to demonstrate and celebrate the significance of all forms of post-16 education, in training and re-skilling workers for a just transition, and for the transformational social and health benefits of accessible lifelong learning.

### **Influencing policy and building political relationships**

The political and social contexts in which UCU and the education sector are embedded need to be understood from the local to the international level. We need to navigate the complexities in which our institutions exist to properly represent the interests of all our members across the post-16 sector.

Education and education workers have been the targets of relentless pressure from the Tory government. Over at least the last decade we have been subjected to a proliferation of increasingly hostile policies whose purpose seems to be to entrench division, stoke the Tory culture war and denigrate education institutions, workers, and trade unionists. These include: anti-trade union legislation (most recently Minimum Service Levels); curbs on the right to protest; the raft of hostile environment policies impacting migrant workers and refugees; the attacks on trans rights, attacks on Black Lives Matter and environmental activists; and the monitoring of social media accounts and other areas of our private lives. Core commitments to democracy and academic freedom that should characterise post-16 sector are being systematically undermined and often actively curtailed as evidenced by the recent singling out of two academics for criticism over their views on the conflict in Israel/Palestine by Michelle Donelan, Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology.



Against the backdrop of this broader political landscape, post-16 education workers face attacks on their disciplines, including significant threats to arts education at every level, constriction of funding under the Adult Education Budget, and cuts across wide swathes of degree programmes ranging from languages and archaeology to pure mathematics and chemistry. We must be prepared to challenge these cuts in the strongest of industrial terms.

Staff are obliged to engage with many and varied ranking and measurement exercises (the REF, TEF and Ofsted) which often have deeply negative impacts on productivity and staff, despite efforts to frame them as supportive. They are resource intensive, expensive, and divisive. These exercises and associated processes can be incredibly damaging to the morale of staff and students, and often have a deleterious effect on both the staff and student experience without contributing to the actual quality of education or research. The resultant brutal culture based on competition between institutions and workers significantly intensifies workload, tying up energy that would be better focused on delivering the highest quality teaching, training, and research that students deserve.

The Inquest into the tragic death by suicide of Ruth Perry following an Ofsted inspection laid bare the toxicity of this morally bankrupt assessment framework. I will be proactive as General Secretary about working with a broad coalition of UK education trade unions to challenge the Ofsted regime, which is actively placing staff at risk across schools, FE provision, and Prison Education. I will also approach other education unions to propose and develop forums to bring our members together more regularly to examine common issues and develop ideas for progressive education policy.

The interlinked research and organising approach I propose for UCU is well suited to collaborative work with other education unions. For example, I see a key opportunity to press Labour for further progressive policy ahead of the General Election, given the slight 'de-marketisation' and greater requirements for financial scrutiny and accountability associated with the reclassification of FE in England to the public sector.

### **Connecting with the wider movement**

The trade union movement operates in an increasingly complex, hostile political context, making it vital to coordinate campaigns with political work for a just and sustainable education sector and society. As President (2020–22) I represented UCU on the Trade Union Coordinating Group, which coordinates campaigns in and beyond Parliament between eleven unions. Via TUCG I directly contributed to early drafts of the Decarbonisation and Economic Strategy Bill, and collaborated on our responses to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, wider environmental work, and Covid-19. As General Secretary I would seek to expand our reach via these groups and improve integration of this with the wider policy work of our elected committees.

Our reach as a Union may differ according to the policy or framework in question. Sometimes explaining the potential consequences for members and ensuring support is offered in an effective and timely way is valuable, and enough. But sometimes we can and must be **much** more active, both in pushing back against particular policy initiatives and processes, and in making the case for progressive changes we need. I want to move us into proactive dialogue with policy makers, away from patterns of reactivity and lower impact.

We also need to recognise that in some circumstances, we will be able to make the case that government policies are against the interests of our employers and ourselves. In these situations, we need to be able to engage and work constructively with them. **This means moving beyond the “one note” adversarial quality of the current leadership’s media and social media approach.** There is an important role for adversarial challenge and part of a General Secretary’s role is to strongly condemn bad government policy and bad employment practices. But this is not the only part of the public facing role of a General Secretary. We need to recognise that members’ interests are sometimes best served by a more constructive approach to industrial relations and the possibilities of joint working.

This destructive Tory administration is very likely to come to an end in 2024 or early 2025. With this transition, UCU needs a centrally coordinated plan to: rebuild relationships with policy makers and the media; effectively and proactively shape policies; wield influence with legislators; inform the media and the public. We need to return to the regular confident development of, and consistent advocacy for our own proposals for policy in areas including governance, research and teaching assessment, admissions policies, and quality assurance processes. We need to more actively build these relationships with the wider UK Labour Party across 2024 to advocate for post-16 education with most effect.

Our campaigning and member-led action needs to be designed and implemented with an eye to the realities of government structures, to maximise our chances of success. That said, UCU is the union for the people offering and developing the education, training, and research that are crucial for our transition to a green economy. We should be setting the agenda for reform of post-16 and the flourishing of every student, every research effort, and every worker in a humane and decent education system.

### **Formalising and developing our international solidarity work**

UCU has a proud tradition of solidarity with education workers, trade unions and struggles for human rights and liberation across the globe. I would make our international work more accessible, and to make it easier for members to get involved. There are many UCU members engaged in discussion, collaboration and solidarity with our siblings struggling in the world’s two most populous countries – India and China – yet these are areas to which UCU, and the wider UK labour movement, tend to pay much less attention. That needs to change.

We need to develop stronger and deeper relationships of understanding with education workers and trade unions across the globe. We face global realities of climate change, conflict and increasing instability. Alongside crackdowns on freedom of expression regarding Israel and Palestine, assaults on democracy and the right to protest around the world mean there has never been a more crucial time for workers to come together and to campaign for our shared interests and concerns.

Unlike our sibling union the NEU, UCU offers few direct opportunities to connect and build international relationships with campaigns and workers. UCU does produce excellent analysis and reports regarding our international agenda, but much work is coordinated by a very small sub-group of the NEC and staff. This work is not often highlighted very widely so many members are unaware of excellent work our staff do with our partner unions via our European and global union federations, the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). I want to change this.

I believe it is as important to communicate with members about UCU's contributions to international policy development and campaigns inside and outside the UK. I will work with committees and staff to widen access to this work and reinvigorate our structures, policies and activities to further develop and maintain active links with unions around the world.

I have a strong personal record of working with international colleagues and trade unionists, and in advocating for UCU to develop consistency in our internationalism. UCU has strong policies in support of the right to self-determination, and for people to live in peace and respect. I have organised in support of the Kurdish people and for the safety and rights of people in Rojava, and successfully brought a motion for UCU to affiliate with the Freedom for Ocalan campaign through our NEC. I have joined several demonstrations against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and I have joined demonstrations in London and Leeds calling for a desperately urgent immediate and full ceasefire in Gaza, in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Public demonstrations are important and powerful, but I believe there is more we can do as a UK trade union to build solidarity and links with trade unionists, educators, and human rights activists in connection with struggles for self-determination and against occupation. I believe we need to redouble our efforts to forge such links in Palestine, and to recognise and support those in Israel who **oppose** their government and campaign against the oppression of Palestinians. Recently two leaders of the Jewish and Palestinian organisation Standing Together visited the UK and met with the leadership of the Fire Brigades Union to discuss possibilities for supportive campaigning that links opposition to war, occupation, and racism to questions of economic and social justice. This is a practical and solidaristic approach I would like UCU members to be able to consider.

I am proud to have worked directly with Ukrainian colleagues and trade unionists to support education and humanitarian work there, and to co-organise with fellow founder members of the self-organised network UCU Members for Ukraine. We have launched a mailing list and run webinars in the absence of this active solidarity work being undertaken formally by UCU. In

2022, I joined an ETUCE mission to Romania and Moldova to meet with Ukrainian refugees and get a better insight into their living arrangements and education provision from school to higher education. I directly experienced the impact that UCU's presence as a UK education trade union can make in this work and am certain that mutual exchange between education unions globally is fundamental to our cause and wider work.

### **Building on my track record of international engagement**

I have also undertaken substantial work to support UCU's international work in connection with education and workers' struggles in Turkey, Rojava, Hong Kong, Palestine, Egypt, Sudan, and Columbia. Being President during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic meant I travelled very little beyond two later trips, to Ireland and the Netherlands, but this experience cemented for me the power of using connective, less carbon-consuming ways to learn through connecting with people and campaigns, and to understand how we can make a difference in the global context.

Just as educational institutions are anchor institutions in their local communities, so UCU can play a role both bilaterally with sibling unions representing educational workers across the world, and multilaterally within Education International and ETUCE. Unions can play a positive role across Europe, both in repairing relationships undermined by the Tories' Brexit and in collectively developing policies and campaigns across the European labour movement.

I will foster more dynamic engagement and mutual learning with international grassroots organising and solidarity campaigns. We should also be working with think tanks that have a global focus and research programmes that intersect with our interests, and especially in areas that transcend borders like democracy, workers' rights, and climate policy. The expanded Research Unit (see **Recruitment and Organising**) will provide members and branches with better information about the international political context and will enable more informed debate and policy development, giving UCU a stronger international voice.

---