**Keele Postgraduate Association**

**EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING ON 30.11.2021**

**Online at 5pm via Microsoft Teams**

**Minutes (composed by Bethany Edge)**

Present:

Bethany Edge (BE: KPA Secretary and EGM Chair), Atieme Ogbolosingha (AO: KPA Vice-President), Sarah Hammond (SH: KPA President), Becky Richards (BR: for items 3&4), Thijs Jansen (TJ), Aysha Mazhar (AM), Sophia Taha (ST), Isabel Martin-Lyons (IM-L), Sahar Abdalla (SA), John Ellis (JE), Mitchelle Bob-Manuel (MB-M), Gabriella Gay (GG), Amy Blaney (AB)

1. Welcome

BE: This EGM is designed to give space to all of you to learn about how the action from the UCU is likely to affect you and how you want us to respond to it as a charity and how we can support you. This meeting is a space for you to ask any questions that you have and seek clarification on any issues surrounding the action, and we're very grateful to have Becky Richards here today, who is one of the Keele UCU representatives who is going to help us out in terms of talking about what the action will involve, the reasons behind the UCU action and will also be available to answer any of your questions afterwards. This meeting will be recorded, and minutes circulated.

2. Apologies

Federico Pettinella (comments emailed to KPA secretary account, will be read out by chair at the start of agenda item 5)

3. Presentation by UCU rep Becky Richards

I just wanted to thank the KPA for allowing us to speak. I'm more interested in being able to answer questions rather than sort of dictating or anything like that, but I will explain why we're striking, and I will explain specially what a sauces or action short of a strike.
At Keele we achieved a ballot result of 62% (Trade Union Act required 50%), which is unprecedented for Keele and that was on two ballots. One was dealing with USS Pensions, and one was dealing with pay and conditions. So we got a mandate from our members to go on strike over these two things.

The pensions dispute, I think we've been fighting this one since 2018 and it's essentially at the moment they're trying to cut our pensions, which is our deferred pay. We don't get paid much, and so we pay into our pensions every month or employer pays into our pensions every month. And in return we get something back after we retire. At the moment, we're facing a round of 40% cut to our pensions, which for most of us is it would push us below the poverty line after retirement. So, we are going on strike over it.

We also have a mandate to strike because our pay has decreased relatively in in relation to inflation by about 20% over the past decade. And so, I should be making between 10:00 and £15,000 more than I am right now. My pay decreases every year because inflation goes up and therefore my relative pay goes down.

For PhD students, once you finish your PhD, you're looking at the potential of a series of casualized contracts, which means that you get a 10-month teaching gig somewhere.
You work about a 1.5 FT E teaching load, and you get paid for a 1. or in some cases a 0.5 teaching load, and so there's a huge problem with a dependence on casualized labour within higher education and it's only getting worse some of the best universities in the country depend on casualized labour and it's unsustainable. So we're fighting against the precarity of casualization. I was on a casualized contract for six years after I finished my PhD. So those of you who want to go into academia, we don't want you to go through that, so we're fighting against that. The gender and race pay gap is huge across the sector.
Our workloads are to the point where we just cannot go on. Last week I worked 58 hours and that was almost exclusively on marking, I didn't get a chance to do any research.
And so, because I didn't do what I was supposed to do last week because I was doing marking in meeting all of the expectations of my job. This week, I'm going to have to work potentially 65 hours crammed into a very short period of time because we're going on strike, which I think is actually impossible, but that's what's expected of me. What I didn't get done last week, I need to do this week, even if it means that I have to work hours that just are mind bogglingly high so our workloads keep going up.
Keele's director of Human Resources or interim Director of Human Resources, has said that we cannot, staff cannot expect to meet all of their contractual obligations within their contracted hours, and that's just standard that's to be expected. It's unsustainable.
Students deserve more.

And postgraduate students probably get the worst end of the deal out of all of this, if I'm being perfectly honest, one PhD students that teach end up getting trapped into this system as well. PhD students that don't teach are facing supervisors who might not actually have the time or the mental capacity to be able to give them what they deserve and undergraduate students. It's kind of like we don't have time or energy to be able to engage in them and all of us want universities to be better were all.

We know that we're not giving the students the best that we can, and we think that we have no choice but to fight for what is right for everyone, for our students, for us, for Keele, for higher education. So, we're going on strike over this. We don't do it lightly.
It is pretty much or last resort. We've tried everything else and the last thing that we can do is withdraw our labour and say we're not going to take anymore.

4. Questions/comments

SH: Could you explain a bit more about action short of strike (ASOS)? Working to contract is still going to mean not doing all the work, so I just thought maybe if we could expand on that for people to understand that.

BR: Action Short of a Strike does not involve withdrawing labour but having limitations on what they are willing to do. Currently, work to contract, do what our contract tells us we have to do. Expectations and requirements they signed up to in their contract. To highlight how much they do beyond, highlight excessive workload, prioritise students and refuse to do work beyond what we are usually expected to do. More a statement than anything else.

The situation highly likely to escalate in the future if disputes are not addressed e.g., refuse to reschedule, marking boycotts.

JE: Is this a final salary pension fund?

BR: No, it is Defined Benefit with an element of Defined Contribution.

BE: Thank you Becky on behalf of the Committee for joining us today for our meeting.

BE: In the chat, Becky has very kindly provided contact email address for the Keele UCU. If anyone does have any questions that crop up after today, we will circulate that when we send out our follow up email and minutes for the membership following today's session (committee@keeleucu.co.uk)

5. KPA Response – member comments

FP comment from email read out by chair: ‘I don't feel like the strike is an issue. Staff need fair treatment, and they mean no ill will towards their students, it's just that we're collateral damage. I support any labour organising - they're the ones who know if they're being sold short by the university, and us as observers don't really need to have a say’

ST: Can we circulate the UCU email regarding teach-outs that they are doing online due to Covid-19 - there's three days of teach outs around lunchtime that could also be circulated to the membership. One is on precarity, which is the panel I'm speaking on and others. It would be worth telling their membership about them that free to attend.

SH: I have the information about all of the teach outs, so that information can be circulated after this meeting.

AB: If students do become concerned or they wish to write to somebody to express (to either side) that they would like the parties to come to a resolution. It might be helpful for students to know where they can go to help with that, like the contact details of who we can get in touch with. If we want to help support our lecturers in any way by adding our voices and comments as individual students.

BE: We are always happy to circulate information to support you to have the information that you need to make your choices.

JE (in chat): In my contract with the University, I expect the service to be fully provided. In saying this, I am not expressing a comment on the validity of the action. However, the university needs to assure paying students as to the quality of the service going forward. I would say that the deductions should not be made and used as a good faith measure to resolve the action quicker. Just to be clear. Deducting wages from striking staff will only further fuel the dispute. The best outcome for students is that the strike is resolved quickly.

BE: Representing your needs and your interests in all of the university committee meetings is something that our President and VP do anyway. So of course, I'm sure they'd be willing to, you know, raise the issues with fee paying students.

BE: The University HR department have already declared that staff who engage in strikes will have their day’s pay deducted from their January payment. So, for people going on strike, they are well aware that they are potentially losing Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, pay. And unfortunately, there's nothing we can do about that at this point. It is unfortunately University's policy.

AO: It is university policy to withhold pay when staff strike. However, in 2020 during the pandemic the University was able to still pay staff because perhaps that was because there's some other universities where bit more lenient because of Covid-19. So that was the only time in in recent history that I can remember that the university didn't withhold staff when striking. Rather, when staff went on strike it is typically the norm to deduct wages.

BE: It is also worth noting that the UCU position on this is that striking staff should expect to lose a day of pay, but they do also have their own hardship fund for people engaging in the industrial action to support them to do so. But obviously that's funded for by other lectures and by donations from staff.

ST: I saw on Twitter that people have gotten universities VC to put any wages unpaid into the student hardship fund, so I don't know if we could possibly ask for the same thing. If that could be a task to ask the university instead of keeping the funds (in the form of deductions from striking staffs wages) to put it to the student hardship funds and that you know that could actually make a real difference to a lot of our students.

AO: That is something that we've been discussing with the with the university. And if you recall in previous years that has been done, so I think I think it is possible for us to take it forward. And I think if only UCU from the communication I have seen is amenable to that kind of idea. So as a committee I think we will still need to emphasize that in upcoming meetings.

AB: I know the KPA position as a charity is difficult, but I suppose all we can do is say that we would hope that the university will put pressure on Universities UK to try and resolve this as swiftly as possible so that students are not impacted any more than we need to be. What would be beneficial is that we have happy lecturers come as soon as possible. Also, thank you for all the work that I'm sure Atieme, Sarah and the rest of the committee already doing.

AO: This is something that we are already doing and that could been pressurizing the university. Of course, as you will appreciate this is it a complex issue. National issue so and but we also appreciate that the university as a member of UUK they have a voice and some influence at that level. So we've been making this known clearly in meetings with senior management, and we believe they have the they have an understanding of what we feel towards that. Our stand consistently has been that strikes are not good for students and whatever the university can do to influence those wider meetings they should be keen on doing.

SH: It is really pleasing that actually we do have kind of the student support behind us and the things that we're doing are the things that you want us to do, which is quite kind of heartening for us.

ST (in chat): Could we include senior management email addresses for students to voice their concerns to within the email as well?

BE: Yes, including senior management email addresses so that students know kind of who to contact about these issues. Yeah, I'm sure that's something that we can circulate with help from the UCU when we talk about who we can contact, who the best people are for students to talk to about these issues.
In addition, AO has just said that students who are concerned can also send there any email directly to our Vice Chancellor. So as well, we can include those details in our information that we circulate.

IM-L: Does anyone know if there are petitions that they can sign or a picket line to go to show support?

ST (in chat): Picket line 8-10 am every day this week. Front and back entrance of the university. It’s to be visible when senior management come onto campus every day

BE: As for the other part of the question - I haven't seen any petitions that have gone around in support of the action (AO and SH also shake their head). It is certainly something we can have a little less talk to you to see if any of the UCU reps at Keele know anything about them. And if we do find out, we can circulate that.

6. Plenary statement from the KPA President

BE: You are more than welcome to contact any of your committee members if you do think of any questions following today's meeting, so myself would be Secretary email account (kpa.secretary@keele.ac.uk), Sarah with the chair account (kpa.chair@keele.ac.uk) or at Atieme with the VP account (kpa.vp@keele.ac.uk) - you're more than welcome to email any of us or contact us via our social media.

SH: Thank you very much for coming and thank you very much for giving us information about what you want to see happening and it's really going to help us in terms of creating our statement for the university and in directing the support that we can give you.

7. Any Other Business

No other business raised

Summary of actions for the committee

Circulate additional information including:

* UCU contact email address
* UCU teach-out details
* Details (including contact details) for students who may wish to write to somebody to express (to either side) that they would like the parties to come to a resolution and where they can get support from to do this
* VC and senior management email addresses to direct complaints at

Raise issues in university meetings around the issues faced by students who are paying fees for a ‘quality service’

Continue to lobby for any wages unpaid due to strike action to be put into the student hardship fund

Continue to encourage the university to put pressure on Universities UK to try and resolve this as swiftly as possible so the impact on students is minimised

Find out if there are petitions circulating to support to UCU action, from students – if there are then to circulate the information