

Have you heard???

Academic and professional services staff at **ALL 150 universities** across the UK will be going on strike this spring, with further escalations expected through the year. The strike seeks to address a dispute with employers that has been ongoing for the past **5 years**.

This strike, like previous ones, will see the cancellation of lectures and all other regular and scheduled activities.

Pissed? Worried?? Fed-up??? So are we! Read on...

Why the strike?

First, let's get the elephant out of the way. No, this is *not* a paid holiday.

All striking members will lose pay for every day they strike.

So why bear this hit?

Our working conditions are your learning conditions. The strike pertains to 4 specific issues:

1. **Casualisation:** one third of academic staff are on [insecure contracts](#). These include those that teach you, and support your academic and personal progress. At UoE, some tutors have [not been paid for nearly 4 months](#) since they began teaching. See another personal account of casualisation: [‘My students never knew’: the lecturer who lived in a tent](#).
2. **Unsafe workloads:** University staff perform, on an average, [15hrs \(that's 2 days\) of unpaid work](#) per week - equivalent to 3 months each year. This has led to an [“epidemic of poor mental health”](#) amongst university staff. See
3. **Pay:** Staff pay has [fallen by 20%](#) after twelve years of below inflation pay offers. Women, BAME and disabled university staff also confront serious gender (15%), ethnicity (17%) and disability (9%) pay gap.
4. **Pensions:** Staff are facing a [35% cut in pensions](#) (differed wages). More troublingly, these cuts are based on **inappropriate valuations and falsehoods** advanced by employers. See a

recent comment on the misguided actions of employers by the FT's Chief Economics Officer:
[UK university pensions suffer from misplaced prudence](#)

In the coming days, you will hear from University management apologising for the disruption to your education. You will hear that students are 'suffering' as a result of the strike.

Such arguments rely on a false moral economy. They pit the wellbeing of students against the wellbeing of instructors - as if the two are in conflict. *It appeals to our sense of duty towards students while simultaneously eroding the conditions under which we can fulfil these duties.* It presumes that by withdrawing our labour we are seeking to harm students rather than willing fairer, more just conduct.^{1,2}

Read a more detailed explanation of each of these issues below. And after reading, email the Principal, Peter Mathieson <principal@ed.ac.uk> asking him to engage with the Union to end this dispute.

1. Casualisation:

Casualisation means the transition towards, and increasing reliance on, fixed-term, part-time contracts. For workers, this means intense job insecurity and all the stresses associated with it. For employers, it means lower costs and, well, less responsibility and accountability.

The [University and College Union](#) (UCU) [estimates](#) that nearly 46% of universities use zero-hour contracts to deliver teaching and that nearly 2/3^{rds} research staff are on fixed-term contracts. This means your lecturers, [TAs](#), librarians, IT support staff, amongst others, could be wondering where their next pay will come from and where they may have to move for their next job. It also means that due to the constant flux in work and workers, permanent staff are subject to unpredictable and varying workloads to fill in gaps as and where they arise.

It is no wonder that there is an '[epidemic of poor mental health](#)' amongst university employees.

This affects you.

¹ [Theresa May criticises university vice chancellors who have say in setting their own pay](#)

² [Bath resignation shines light on university governance](#)

Increasing casualisation means you may not be able to access sustained support, build relationships with those that can help your own progress, and may be faced with staff already stretched beyond their limit.

The strike demands employment security.

2. Workload:

Did you know that the university assigns approximately the following [time-scales](#) to assess your work?

Summative Essay (up to 3000 words)	30 mins
Summative Essay (3001-4500 words)	45 mins
Summative Essay (4501 words or more)	1 hr
Honours/Masters Dissertations /MSc Research Methods Marked	2 hrs

Think about that. 30 mins to read (upto) a 10-12 page essay and give you substantive feedback. Plus, regardless of the size of the class, instructors are expected to follow a 15 day turn-around - all while still teaching, doing research and undertaking various administrative duties.

University staff perform, on an average, [15hrs \(that's 2 days\) of unpaid labour per week](#), in some cases, especially [amongst younger and casualised workers, rising to 40 hours \(5 days\) per week](#). The workloads in universities are unmanageable and unsustainable. Once again, a cause of decreasing levels of well-being and increasing levels of burn-out.

This affects you.

Increasing workload means that it becomes harder for students to receive the care and attention - academic and pastoral - that they merit. While staff are keen to support you, the conditions under which we work - and our decreasing well-being - means that this is not always possible.

3. Equity and Pay:

We've all heard about the [gender pay gap](#). But there's also the [race pay gap](#) and [disability pay gap](#).

A [report](#) by the Times Higher Ed notes that women fare worse in universities than in other sectors with respect to the pay gap (an average of 15%).³ The race pay gap is as high as [26%](#).⁴ In addition to issues of pay, there is substantial evidence that the working conditions for [women](#), [LGBT+ people](#), [people of color](#) and [disabled people](#) is not always conducive to [personal](#) or [professional](#) well-being.

Amongst all this, [staff pay has dropped by around 20% in real-terms since 2009](#). Meanwhile pay for University VCs and other senior management is [ballooning](#). And managers have given themselves significant pay rises [pre](#) and [during the pandemic](#).

At UoE, the average pay is £33,000 (these include your teachers, librarians, IT and other student support staff) while the [Principal's pay is 10 times higher](#).

This affects you.

Issues of pay and workplace equity are of concern to you as future employees. The normalisation of such unequal conduct by employers will impact your (and/or your family and friends') experience and rights at work.

The strike demands that employers take substantial measures to close the pay gaps and that they accept accountability for preventing and redressing workplace discrimination and harassment. Furthermore, the UCU affirms that universities are public institutions with the purpose of creating social good for their students, and for society at large - not private corporations intended towards the accumulation of wealth.

4. Pensions:

This is a continuation from the 2019 strikes.

³ This [tool](#) helps calculate the lifetime loss due to the gender pay gap by institution.

⁴ There is no HE-specific data for the disability pay gap; however, it stands at [15%](#) nationally.

All UK employers are required, by law, to provide a workplace pension plan to their employees. This is a way to help people save a sufficient amount of retirement income.^{5,6} Without adequate savings, people are required to stay in employment longer⁷ and/or are likely to face financial hardship if and when they do retire.⁸ This situation *may* also have a detrimental effect on overall employment rates.^{9,10}

Pensions are not a freebie or an arbitrary perk. They are part of earned income. Pensions savings are made up of direct contributions from employee pay as well as contributions from the employer as earned benefit.

As such, all UK universities have a responsibility to ensure staff have a decent pension for when they retire. Our early actions pertained to the [UUK's](#) (Universities UK - the representative of UK universities) attempt to restructure the pension scheme from a [defined benefit to a defined contribution](#) scheme. Having now rolled back that proposition, the UUK have now pushed through major changes and cuts to the guaranteed, defined benefit (DB) element of the scheme to prevent employers from having to pay significantly higher contributions. This has resulted, on average, in a further 35% cut to the guaranteed retirement benefits, as voted last month on 28th February.

This is despite UUK's own assessment that these increases are not necessary and have not been properly justified. [USS called on to reconsider benefits amid deficit shrink.](#)

The indignation of employees, thus, is founded on a demand for fairness, accuracy and transparency in the financial workings of the employers.¹¹

This affects you.

⁵ [Q&A: Pension automatic enrolment](#)

⁶ [Understanding the Mandatory UK Pension Scheme](#)

⁷ [Pension Crisis: One in five working Brits have NO savings at all for retirement](#)

⁸ [State pension age: Millions of people will have to work an extra year before retiring at 68](#)

⁹ Bertoni, M. and Brunello, G. (2017) Does A Higher Retirement Age Reduce Youth Employment?

¹⁰ [States examine lowering retirement age of government employees](#)

¹¹ For more information on UUK conduct as pertaining to the last pensions dispute see:

[Read Sam Marsh's \(one of UCU's USS pensions negotiator\) Twitter thread on how we reached this juncture.](#)

[Ten reasons why the USS is a scandal waiting to bite back](#)

[The USS valuation and the question of affordability](#)

The issue of pensions concerns not only about employees' interests but represents the continued [marketisation of higher education](#) that affects your experience as students.

The UCU has been asking employers to commit to the findings of the JEP but to no avail. The strike is a means to put pressure on employers to do so.

'But why should we suffer?'

You shouldn't.

The 'suffering' argument relies on a false moral economy.

- It pits the wellbeing of students against the wellbeing of instructors - as if the two are in conflict. *It appeals to our sense of duty towards students while simultaneously eroding the conditions under which we can fulfill these duties.* It presumes that by withdrawing our labour we are seeking to harm students rather than willing fairer, more just conduct.
12,13
- It also assumes that students have narrow interests - that they care only about classes and grades; that they are a-historical beings, without a past and a future outside and beyond their role as students, uninterested in and unaffected by the social and political contexts of the worlds they occupy. *The normalisation of such conduct by employers will impact your experience and rights as future workers, too.*
- Most crucially, it diminishes our duty towards students to a curricular relationship - one that is limited to teaching 'course content'. Yet, our pedagogic duty to students exceeds that. *It entails what [Paulo Freire](#) calls '[conscientization](#)' - i.e. 'the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action'.* To dismiss this aspect of our duty is to fail students.

In short, the discourse of 'suffering' seeks to *create a divide* between students and instructors, and thus weakens the possibility of solidarity. But the history of progress is that of solidarity between those who would otherwise be divided.

Remember: Striking is an action of last resort.

Striking employees will lose pay on strike days. The sacrifice and stakes for striking employees are high.

¹² [Theresa May criticises university vice chancellors who have say in setting their own pay](#)

¹³ [Bath resignation shines light on university governance](#)

Solidarity: What you can do

Like the examples above, your experience in university does not stand in isolation from ours. Our collective well-being is intertwined. Your time and your actions here are deeply imbricated with those that came before you and those that will come after. Whether or not you (choose to) recognise this, you are a part of this history.

During the last strike, [students here](#) participated in an [occupation in solidarity with strikers](#). If you decide you'd like to be active within it, here are some things you can do:

- **Please do not cross the picket-line! We cannot emphasise this enough!** (Also, friends don't let friends cross the picket!)
- **Continue your education. Attend the teach-outs!**
- Talk to your friends and other students and get them to support the strike too. Explain to them the reasons behind the action in this case and, if needed, the principles of a strike itself.
- Get in touch with your local students' union and UCU branch to see what support they need.
- If you are a PG student, you can (*and should!*) join UCU. You can join as a student member if you aren't employed by the University, and as a regular member if you do teach (both are free for PGs).
- Continue your curricular education with your peers. Organise reading and discussion groups during lecture time. Undertake independent study by doing research on the week's topic in the library or online.

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any."

- [Alice Walker](#)

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The History of Strikes in the UK

The UCU strike is part of a long history of strikes in the UK. Below are a few examples - some epochal, others more recent.

UCL Rent Strike

Finally, a recent example from the university context. '[UCL, Cut the Rent](#)' is a campaign for affordable student housing. Between 2015 and 2017, the campaign organised 3 rent strikes to protest the poor quality of student accommodation, and the lack of University investment in these facilities despite increasing rents. The campaign demanded that UCL cut the rent in order to 'prevent UCL from becoming exclusive to those from privileged backgrounds or who receive large scholarships or bursaries.'¹⁴

In 2017, 200 students went on a 5-month rent strike which ended with *the University pledging £1.5m to fund bursaries for students and to freeze some rents for the following year.*¹⁵ *Despite this achievement, their campaign to keep housing affordable [continues](#).*

Junior doctors' strike

The trade union movement has become substantially weakened since the 80s. This is in no small part due to the power of the strikers mentioned above and strong action taken by governments to curb this power.

Even so, the most powerful example of a recent strike is that of the junior doctors in the NHS. In 2016, junior doctors called a strike to protest the reclassification of their working hours¹⁶ and the false/misleading information used to justify this change.¹⁷

More crucially, the strike sought to highlight the negative impacts of the underfunding and understaffing of the NHS on the wellbeing of doctors and therefore on the quality of patient care. It forced the government to have to explain and rethink its plans for the NHS. *The strike changed public discourse on the connection between the patient safety and fairness towards doctors, creating the conditions for solidarity.*¹⁸

May '68 Student Strikes, University of Essex

1968 is widely recognised as the year of global student uprisings. Students the world over - from Berlin to Mexico City, from Prague and London to Chicago - took to the streets in protest. The common theme underlying these was resistance to the excesses of state power that took the

¹⁴ [UCL Cut the Rent](#)

¹⁵ [Students win £1.5m pledge from UCL after five-month rent strike](#)

¹⁶ [Junior doctors' strike: Jeremy Hunt refuses to negotiate over NHS contract imposition](#)

¹⁷ [Junior doctors' contract should be suspended after 7-day NHS revelations, Tom Watson says](#)

¹⁸ [Passers-by show solidarity with striking staff at Huddersfield and Calderdale hospitals](#)

the forms of war (specifically, the US invasion of Vietnam) and other authoritarianisms (capitalist and communist).¹⁹

In 1968, the University of Essex, barely yet 5 years old, was at the heart of the student revolts in the UK. Students rose against the excesses of war,²⁰ and the rising tide of racism and xenophobia.²¹ When the University sought to suspend some students for their involvement in the protests, the student body, in solidarity with faculty and staff, called a strike, shut down classes, and established a free university in their stead. Even after the reinstatement of the students, blockades and occupations of the University continued in solidarity with those disciplined and arrested for their participation in protest.

*The '68 protests, at Essex and elsewhere, radically 'changed the outlook and make up of student politics, eventually reshaping how universities were run'.*²²

June '68 Ford Motors Women Machinists' Strike

Around the same time as the student uprisings, women machinists at the Ford Motor Company plant in Dagenham (then a part of Essex County) walked out of their jobs in protest of the categorisation of their work as unskilled. Women workers stitched the materials needed to make car and van seats. Without their labour, no seats were possible.²³

The strike was to demand the reclassification of their jobs as skilled. It lasted 3 weeks.²⁴ During this period, 9000 men were laid off (due to the lack of work created by the machinists' strike - no stitches, no seats).²⁵ This resulted in a great deal of animosity towards the striking women, not just from male workers but from the union, led by men, too. Still, the women persisted, and public support for them grew.²⁶

The strike ended when, with the intervention of the Employment Minister, Barbara Castle, Ford agreed to reclassify the machinists' labour as skilled. The women returned to work but received only 92% of men's wages. Even so, this strike is widely credited for the introduction of the [1970](#)

¹⁹ [Everyone to the barricades](#)

²⁰ [In May 1968 police were called on to the Colchester Campus after Dr Inch, a Government scientist from Porton Down, was shouted down by students opposed to chemical and biological warfare research as he tried to give a lecture at the University.](#)

²¹ [Hundreds attend Enoch Powell meeting to make their protest against his racism.](#)

²² [A very Essex protest](#)

²³ [Dagenham sewing machinists recall strike that changed women's lives](#)

²⁴ [Dagenham Timeline](#)

²⁵ The men were later all re-hired but the disruption lost Ford £117m.

²⁶ ['I'm glad I did it': Ford Dagenham workers recall strikes](#)

[Equal Pay Act](#). The women of Ford Motors in Dagenham went on strike again in 1984, this time to demand equal pay.²⁷

The true achievement of the 1968 Dagenham strike is the official and popular recognition of women's work as skilled work. This strike is the subject of the [film](#) and [musical](#) Made in Dagenham.

1976-1978 Grunwick Migrant Women's Strike

In August 1976 women workers - mainly South Asian migrant women - walked off their jobs at the Grunwick film processing factory in London in protest of their demeaning conditions at work. Workers were poorly paid, and coerced into overtime; additionally, they were required to ask their managers for permission to use the bathroom.²⁸

At the start of the strike, the women had little support. Soon, a larger group of workers at the factory started agitating for union recognition at Grunwick. The strikers and other Grunwick workers approached the wider trade union movement for organisational support and training. The strike action thus grew, lasting about 2 years.²⁹

In March 1977, 1400 Trade Unionist marched through Willesden in support of the less than 30 striking Grunwick women. The strike continued, with people losing jobs and various union actions against the employer.

- In June 1977, miners from Yorkshire and Scotland joined the picketers.
- July 11th 1977 marked a National Day of Action against Grunwick and drew a crowd of over 20,000 from all over the UK.³⁰
- Grunwick operated a mail order service whereby people could send their film rolls by post, have them developed at the factory, and then returned. In November 1977, the Postal Workers' Union voted to boycott Grunwick in support of the strikers.³¹

The picket lines grew and the strike continued into 1978.

The legacy of Grunwick is that of 'the power of ordinary people and our labour movement in fighting for the rights of minorities'.³² *For the first time, the rights of migrant workers, especially*

²⁷ [The Dagenham sewing machinists' strike: 45 years on](#)

²⁸ [The Grunwick Dispute](#)

²⁹ [Striking women](#)

³⁰ [Strikers in saris](#)

³¹ [The strike that brought immigrant women into Britain's working class](#)

³² [How the Grunwick Strike woke up trade unionists to minority workers' rights](#)

women, were recognised within the union movement. The striking women are remembered today as the [Lions of Grunwick](#).