



**BUILD TO WIN  
A VISION FOR HE**

# A NEW STRATEGY AND PLAN OF ACTION FOR WINNING IN HE

Over the last four years, UCU has taken extended industrial action in the Four Fights dispute. First, in 2019-20, again in 2021-22, and most recently in 2022-2023, including a UK wide marking and assessment boycott. Throughout this period, but particularly during the last 16 months, there has been an enormous commitment of resources and energy by members and staff. Our ability to mobilise members for action would be the envy of almost any other union. In our most recent wave of strike action, we achieved a total victory on USS and we made a breakthrough on pay which witnessed employers – for the first time ever – agreeing to negotiate nationally on workload, equality pay gaps, and casualisation, even agreeing to our request that zero-hour contracts be abolished in HE. We know however, that this was not enough, and along with a pay deal of 5 - 8%, this was rejected by the membership.

During this period, employers have become incredibly entrenched. Even in the face of a determined marking and assessment boycott, they did not improve their offer, or budge an inch in negotiations. They decided that it was more important to crush the morale of their staff, than save the reputation of HE or maintain the educational standards of their students' education.

In nearly every other sector and type of dispute we engage in, positive ballot results and a credible strike threat tend to be enough to win concessions from employers. In the Four Fights dispute, this has not been the case. Similarly, the most extensive and sustained strike action we have ever delivered did not move them. We must reflect on the pay dispute. We must acknowledge the unique belligerence of HE employers, and that they acted with total collective discipline in refusing to give our union anything resembling a victory.

On top of this, we know our demands – for a binding, 150-employer, sector-wide agreement covering a very wide range of issues – are rightly ambitious. This isn't just a 'fight', or even four 'fights'. It's a battle to reform the entire higher education sector. If we want to win on all fronts, then repeating the same strategy but with only minor tactical tweaks will not work; that is not learning from our experience. We need an entirely new strategy and plan. We must also act with the same collective discipline demonstrated by our employers in execution of that plan.

My call for reflection on both our strategy and tactics around the national HE disputes is not new. In April 2022, I published a highly detailed 34-page report where I reviewed our progress to date, and put forward a 12-18 month plan for winning the Four Fights dispute. You can read it [here](#). The plan was designed to build us gradually to a UK-wide ballot; building relationships with key stakeholders along the way, as well as building our own organising capacity, and growing the size of the UK fighting fund.

The plan I put forward was based on the following principles:

- We need **higher membership density**, i.e. more members in the union.
- We need **higher participation**, with more members taking industrial action.
- We need **more democratic negotiations** – in terms of how we develop our demands and how we bargain with employers.
- We need **stronger rep and volunteer structures**, with more members recruited to become departmental reps or volunteer in campaigns.
- We need to **use our time and resources better** – in terms of staff time, members' time, and members' subscription money.

This plan was put to a special meeting of the Higher Education Sector Conference in April 2022, and aspects of it were also put to the Higher Education Committee. Ultimately, the plan I put forward was voted down. Instead, we commenced the UCU Rising ballot in September 2022. As you would expect as general secretary, I took a principled decision to front this ballot to the best of my ability. I invested every resource I could (both union and personally), and we ran an incredibly successful ballot campaign.

I still believe that an approach of thinking through our aims, and building our capacity to take action, has a much better chance of success than the current method adopted by the union of launching one dispute after another. Doing this will enable us to develop a strategy that matches the ambitions we share as a union to win gains in every area of members' terms and conditions. Such a strategy needs to recognise: how deeply entrenched employers are; how much it will take to move employers; and how much it will take to win an agreement covering an entire sector on multiple issues in an era when any kind of sectoral bargaining, at least in the UK, is extremely rare. This is why in addition to the above, I believe that we must add further principles to the ones I outlined previously. These are:

- We need, where possible, **UK-wide coordination with other higher education unions** – we will be stronger if we take the time to negotiate with other unions to explore running a UK-wide coordinated dispute, rather than always calling ballots on our own timescale and running separate disputes.

- We need **strong member support for a cohesive set of strike actions** – we are at our strongest when everyone knows and supports a well-established plan.
- We need **to invest heavily in local bargaining**. Every local win builds confidence and puts pressure on our employers. We shouldn't delay local wins while we build for sector-wide wins.

Establishing a clear plan that the whole union can support, and coordinating with other unions, will be key to winning our next UK-wide dispute. But we will not simply be waiting for that moment to come. We need to build every branch so that it is well organised, bigger, and more active. This is why, as we implement a strategic plan and build towards a UK-wide victory, we must also support every branch to push our issues through local bargaining. Workload, casualisation, and unequal pay will remain key priorities for our union, we will make progress on these areas across the board by launching a new bargaining and information system that will empower branches with data to robustly challenge their employer, and make evidence-based claims that branches can win on.

The strategy I set out in the paper from April 2022 is very long, and I don't expect everyone to read it. But I am sharing it with you as I want you to see the type of analysis and strategy that I have put forward before. You have my promise that if re-elected, I will make it my mission to ensure that our decision-making bodies adopt an approach founded on the strategy I have outlined here.

Learning from our recent disputes, we need to be forward-looking in our intent, building a stronger and more resilient union. In our **recent survey of HE members**, 82% voted in favour of the development of a longer-term strategy, so I feel confident the majority of UCU members want to take a different, smarter, approach. Re-elect me if this is what you want to see.



# **OTHER STRATEGIC CONCERNS FOR THE NEXT 5 YEARS**

## **THE TEACHERS' PENSION SCHEME (TPS)**

**TPS, the pension scheme for the majority of post-92 members, is set to face a huge rise in costs. The increased costs are artificial and unfair. They are a direct result of the government's decision to retain a discount rate based on the outlook for the economy in the UK which has deteriorated. This created an increase in the cost of TPS in the region of 14%. Whilst the government has chosen to compensate centrally funded organisations like schools and colleges, it has declined to extend this to the post-92 universities, meaning a substantial amount of money that could otherwise be used for the benefit of the students, staff, and their communities is being taken out of the sector.**

Our union needs to be ready to respond to the threat this poses. We cannot wait for a change of government, or hope the current one changes its mind. Support will be there for every branch that faces cost cutting measures from their employer, but this also needs to be backed up by a UK-wide campaign. We have saved USS, now it is time to make sure we save TPS.

# STUDENT NUMBER CONTROLS

The lack of student number controls in UK means that institutions compete with each other for as many home students as they can recruit – which is increasingly as many as possible. This has devastating consequences for workload and fuels the excuse that we need a reserve army of casualised labour to service large, annual, fluctuations in numbers. But it also disastrous for the sector as a whole, as there are only a given number of students who can apply to university, and so universities are forced into a competition with institutions they should be working collaboratively with.

The result is that finances are poured into university marketing campaigns, expensive building projects, and other activities that universities believe will attract students to them over their competitor institutions. Without student number controls, wealthy or traditionally prestigious universities have the upper hand and are able to stockpile students, whilst others suffer from under-recruitment. This creates a dual problem of some institutions having more students than they can accommodate, and others facing budget shortfalls.

The unequal distribution of students in the UK is an issue our union must address. It is a damaging consequence of the marketisation of higher education. It pushes already wealthy institutions to adopt perverse practices to Hoover up more wealth, and it creates financial volatility and insecurity for others. None of this is good for staff, students, education, or research.

# REDUNDANCIES AND COURSE CLOSURES

Over the past decade we have seen a financial and ideological attack on our universities. The government has cut funding to higher education, and it has also embarked on a general campaign of denigrating the arts and humanities, and any other qualification it deems does not give added value to earnings in the labour market. This is a horrendous, reductive, agenda.

The attack has led to fewer students signing up to particular courses. The lack of funding has been made worse recently by the increase in inflation, and the news that the government will force post-92 universities to fund the increase in TPS. In many instances, rather than exploring alternative forms of saving costs – or joining the union in lobbying the government for progressive reform of HE – employers look first to make staff the shock absorbers.

The union is already engaged in a number of local disputes relating to the threat of course closures and redundancies. I have launched a local defence fund to make sure every branch has the tools and resources it needs to defend our members. But we know that more attacks are to come. In 2024, the whole union must unite around a national campaign aimed at saving higher education and defeating marketisation. We will not allow a zombie Conservative government, with no mandate to rule, to make the ground fertile for Vice Chancellors who look to slash staff and course at the first sign of a problem. Defending the sector nationally from financial and ideological attacks, whilst fighting for improvements locally must be our key strategy for the immediate future in HE.

## SUMMARY

This year we have delivered an amazing victory in USS. We must now ensure we build and organise so that we can withstand the threat of redundancies and course closures, whilst also supporting local bargaining in our universities on the issues that matter. We must also ensure we have the capacity to launch a national campaign in defence of TPS, and to protect our post-92 universities.

For that we need to build membership, density, local strength, representative structures, and move forward with a clear plan that everyone supports. This document sets out how I believe we can do this. It is the product of my years of experience as your general secretary, and the thousands of conversations I have had with UCU members. Re-elect me, elect David Hunter as VP, and the full platform who are backing my **campaign**.

**Let's get to work.**