Report – UCU Fair Work project

Introduction

Research conducted by Dr Kendra Briken and Dr Jen Remnant, Work, Employment and Organisations, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde. Editing and revisions were completed in partnership with Prof. Jeanette Findlay, UCU Scotland President.

Jen Remnant is a social scientist whose research focuses on the relationship between paid employment and health. This includes the management and support of workers experiencing ill-health, disabled workers or workers with undiagnosed symptoms. Her recent research has been with HE workforces and the NHS. She is also a co-investigator on a project funded by the Scottish Government regarding Fair Work levers in the hospitality sector.

Kendra Briken is a sociologist. Her research focuses on work, employment, and technology. She is specifically interested in developments around the digitalisation of work, decision-making processes around the invention and implementation of new technologies, and workforce outcomes. Her recent work explores the cross-sectional emerging varieties of automation, related power structures, and how they impact on workers' lives.

Both investigators are Strathclyde UCU branch committee members and can be described as insider-researchers (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2013). This means that they are describing and discussing the views of UCU members as current UCU members themselves. Work commenced on 6th March 2023 and will conclude June 12th when presented to UCU Scotland staff and members.

The Fair Work Convention's vision is that 'people in Scotland will have a world-leading working life where Fair Work drives success, wellbeing and prosperity for individuals, businesses, organisations and society' (Fair Work Convention Website, n.d). The five core dimensions of Fair Work, in this context, are 1) effective voice, 2) opportunities, 3) security, 4) fulfilment and 5) respect. All Scottish public agencies and bodies - including the Scottish Funding Council - are required by ministerial instruction to deliver on the Fair Work Framework. In addition, Fair Work First conditionality is applied to all Scottish Government grants, creating an obligation on Scottish universities to deliver on the Fair Work First conditions (Scot Gov, 2023).

From the ongoing industrial disputes between University College Union members in Scotland and their employing HE and FE institutions, it is apparent that members do not believe their work conditions meet the dimensions of Fair Work. We must be clear that a dispute – for example, about pay – does not necessarily mean that Fair Work is not being delivered. We will discuss later what terms of the dispute are not consistent with the Fair Work conditions or Framework. There is also increasing academic evidence that both HE and FE institutions in the UK are failing to follow through with their equalities strategies relating to race (Ahmet, 2020), gender (Savigny, 2019) and disability (Campbell, 2020; Bathmaker & Pennacchia, 2022).

This report spans HE institutions in Scotland. Researchers started with an expanded concept of the established, evaluative dimensions of Fair Work (see table 1) which was developed from literature on the topic. The report will give an overview on the literature on Fair Work in HE, the current challenges (technologies; cuts, industrial disputes) to reflect on what are the enablers/barriers to Fair Work for university workers. The data presented in the report has been generated by exclusively by UCU Scotland members. However, given the representation of UCU members across Scottish Universities, disciplines, sectors and job-type findings can be considered relevant to university workers in Scotland more broadly (UCU Scotland website, 2023).

The report structure begins with an overview of the project followed by the research questions and aims. It then provides a short academic literature review, before detailing the methods used and presenting the project findings which are organised in line with the Fair Work framework. The report closes with a conclusion and recommendations for UCU Scotland regarding the Fair Work Framework and potential engagement with the Fair Work Convention.

Research aims questions

The aims of this research project were to develop a consensus model of Fair Work for university workers drawing on the work of Mack and Lansley (1985). The research team planned to access enough data to confidently present varied viewpoints to ascertain what most UCU Scotland members see to be 'necessities' for fair work – something which everyone should expect and which no worker should have to do without; and what unfair workplace practices or conditions no worker should have to experience. A further aim of the project was to develop a template survey for use by UCU Scotland branches for elective use to further explore member views.

The above two aims would be informed by and respond to the below research questions:

1) What does Fair Work look like from the perspective of UCU members in Scotland?
2) What are the enablers of Fair Work being realised for members in their working lives?
3) What are the barriers to Fair Work being realised for members in their working lives?

Literature review

In this section, we want to focus on the specific contextual setting for Fair Work in HE to understand how generalisable established measures for Fair Work are, and what might be added to help generate value to amplify Fair Work conditions.

Scotland's Fair Work Convention has been established to improve job quality in Scotland. The Convention uses socio-economic evidence that improving job quality improves wellbeing at work and might impact positively on productivity and performance (for Scotland see Rogers & Richmond 2016). A report published by Eurofund in 2021 iterates that job quality (and Fair Work) leads a to more sustainable work environment. The report focusses on the relevance of job quality to address most recent challenges to employers and employees alike, namely 'psychosocial risks at work, ICT-based mobile work, fragmentation of work and the specific challenges in the era of COVID-19' (Eurofund 2023).

In 2022, the Scottish Funding Council published their 'Future Outcomes Agreement Guidance for the AY 22/23' and therein stated that 'Institutions should outline what they are doing in practice to deliver Fair Work for their employees, noting this is a condition of funding for colleges and universities. It is of importance now for UCU as collective actor to gain an understanding of the potential for any measurements to support the reporting, and to be able to critically assess the outcomes delivered by employers in HE. This is even more important since in their reporting on contributing to the National Performance Framework (NPF) Universities Scotland are claiming to be contributing to economy, fair work, and business via research grants and estates investments (US 2021). In their reporting, core Fair Work measures are presented, for example employee voice. Here, HEIs often present figures for trade union membership as positive. At the same time, the evidence presented here, in the context of the current ongoing industrial action, suggests that the formalised and recognised employee voice channels managed by the HEIs are not considered adequate by UCU Scotland members.

This review and project more generally was conducted in the context of 5 years of industrial dispute between UCU members and their employers. The core conflict is basically mirroring the core Fair Work dimensions, pay, workload, casualisation and equality, and UCU has generated extensive reporting regarding the nature of employment within the HE sector.

In the following section, we engaged with themes drawn from recent debates on most recent challenges for job quality. We included the notion of public understanding of working in HE to set the scene given the ongoing disputes, and media coverage impacting on employment relations.

Entrepreneurial activity shape shifting HEIs

Over the past decade, it is possible to recognise a shape shifting of HEIs towards a focus on entrepreneurial activities. Opposed to the assumption this might be true for some industry-research institutions, the Universities Scotland budget submission to Scottish Government (2021) reports that '94% of Scottish universities provide entrepreneurship training to staff and graduate start-ups and that '83% of all Scottish universities now have a non-campus incubator to support graduate & staff start-ups.' Equally, close to 90% of Scottish Universities have 'embedded entrepreneurship within degree programmes. This is a change in purpose for HEIs, which have now become spaces where entrepreneurialism is promoted and rewarded (NCEE, 2023).

Baltaru and Soysal (2018) detail how 761 HEI in 11 European countries that 'regardless of geographical and institutional differences, HEIs with high levels of "entrepreneurialism"(e.g. in service provision and external engagement) are characterised by a larger proportion of administrative staff' while they cannot find any evidence that this increase is based on structural pressures (Indicators would be: higher student enrolment numbers, budget cuts or deregulation). In fact, they can show that the results underpin neo-institutionalists arguments of organisational mimicry, to allow for high levels of external connectedness. Their findings reflect experiences from Scottish HEI, with increasing professional and administrative units catering for knowledge exchange, executive education, and fuelling pipelines for industry. These jobs are not to be confused with what David Graeber called 'bullshit' jobs. These jobs are not a simple feudal expansion for senior management to gain more clout, but they support the core functions of the entrepreneurial university – in a society that idolises entrepreneurialism and the related buzzwords (innovation districts, technology driven). Or, as a Audretsch (2014:313) suggests: 'While the entrepreneurial university was a response to generate technology transfer and knowledge-based start-ups, the role of the university in the entrepreneurial society has broadened to focus on enhancing entrepreneurship capital and facilitating behaviour to prosper in an entrepreneurial society' (Audretsch, 2014).

Changing academic identity and work

In a recent paper, Ivancheva and Garvey (2022) critically engaged with the question how the shift to entrepreneurialism changes academic labour. They conclude that 'Academic researchers are rewarded for innovative cognitive labour. Their formal subsumption, however, finds them accustomed to questions of the practical application of their knowledge to 'external users,' or to research grant applications, within the discernible market framework', and proving 'impact of research activity is now an established measure. (Ivancheva and Garvey, 2022).

In sum, literature suggests that the fragmentation at work as suggested by EUROFUND is not simply based on the everyday tasks of employees working in HEI. Fragmentation is also a structural issue in line with the new mission statements pursued by HEIs. the authors suggest that fulfilment at work for

workforces in HEI will be challenging to measure due to conflicting job roles and identities, and a general difficulty to understand evaluative baselines.

<u>Wellbeing at work and psychosocial risks at work</u>

In a report from 2021, Wray and Kinman highlight that 'wellbeing related to key psychosocial hazards, i.e. job demands, support from managers and colleagues, role and relationships, in the higher education sector in the UK continues to be below minimum recommended standards' (Wray and Kinman 2021:42). The report gives evidence that most wellbeing 'initiatives' or campaigns are perceived as least impactful on improvements, while action taken that focusses on dimensions such as respect at work, security, voice, and fulfilment score high. These core dimensions are undermined by the shape shifting of HEIs focus to entrepreneurialism, and mainly socio-temporal aspects of work in HE. Studies suggest that indicator systems impact on the socio-temporal dimension of teaching, learning and of the pedagogic relationship. In a recent paper by Leathwood and Read, they point out that 'major temporal reorderings within academia stand in co-productive relationship with the growing number of indicator systems' (2022). By this, the authors mean than within HE workplaces there is now an increased time pressure on staff to meet the various metrics of success they are held to. This pressure inhibits staff from being able to engage in long-term development and planning, and instead means meeting short-term and just-in-time deadlines for all aspects of their working practices (*ibid*). The resulting expectations of academic productivity become internalised producing a new form of 'tacit governance' over precarious staff. The uncertainty about future academic contracts impacts on pedagogical relationships with students and comes to the detriment of teaching quality and pastoral support for students.

Furthermore, the implications of these high pressure, short-term work systems in HE on the struggle over diversity and inclusion need to be considered (Remnant, 2023, Remnant *et al*, 2023).

Technology at work

While the impact of advances in learning technology had been an issue for the sector for a while, the massive rise of the EdTech market (as shown by Ben Williamson in a report for the UCU (2020) signifies the positioning of EdTech providers as tech-solutionists for the teaching market. Years of modularisation, of increasing student numbers and decrease of time for module design (some Scottish Universities do not even allocate workload for module design) led to the perfect storm of the 'powerpointisation' of lectures, and to the increase in 'educational interoperability' (the ability to exchange services and data with one another). This brief assessment shows the challenges for Fair Work in general. The shape shifting nature of university has impacted on individual jobs with the effect of unseen work intensification, or time compression. More and more different tasks are to be delivered based on the same workload allocation. These tasks though are on one hand predefined by ever more elaborated performance management models in the last decades (Taylor and Baines, 2012)

Lessons to be learnt from the literature?

We suggest that the outlined developments support the idea that Fair Work dimensions are accessible for evaluation, but complex to measure for at least two reasons: HEIs are producing the data that is then used for assessing progress, with limited opportunity for HEI employees to contribute to institutional decision-making. Fair Work, as many other soft regulations, might face the same challenges known from initiatives for example in the realm of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). One well researched example is the Athena Swan Charter, a framework which is used to support and transform gender equality within higher education (HE) and research (Advance HE website, 2023) has gained some critical reflection over the past years with some potential learning for Fair Work measurements. The literature agrees that equality programmes, such as the charter, are often what Tzanakou and Pearce describe as 'poorly designed to address complex issues, such as inter-sectional identities and discrimination experienced by self-assessment team members' (2019: 1191).

By the same token, requesting better measures is equally complicated. The request for fairer or 'more sophisticated workload models' that might reflect the 'real work' done might be used in the next instalment of algorithmic management-driven time-span control and surveillance, from lecturer to online learning educator (Ovetz, 2021). If measurements are part of the problem at work in HEIs in the first place, it will be challenging to gain a decent picture to allow UCU to act on.

These findings stimulated our research question, and the focus on more qualitative, and ideally longitudinal reporting. The findings from our explorative research will inform this attempt.

Table 1: Proposed Fair Work items for measurement

Fair Work dimensions	*Established evaluative elements of Fair Work*	*Expanded social/non-material elements of Fair Work*
Effective voice	Trade union consultation in institutional / local decision-making. Effective voice spans both direct and indirect voice channels and - crucially - their operation (so that staff have a voice, which is listened to, and which can make a difference/effecting change).	Access to institutional leadership (internal committees; sub-themes; industry/business facing)
Opportunity	Development policy and training, promotions data, access to health resources, access to work, experience of work and opportunities to learn and progress in work - for all, and for those with protected characteristics (or characteristics for which there might be a case for protection - for example, social class).	Networking, team/department/institutional culture, performance management, informal support pathways
Security	Job security, precarity, Security as an aspect of fair work spans the stability of employment, hours and earnings, as well as absolute and relative levels of income and other benefits.	
Fulfilment	Workload, value perception, presenteeism, intention to stay/leave, institutional transparency, job crafting	
Respect	Respect for health, safety and wellbeing; respect for family life/work-life balance; respect for contribution; interpersonal respect and treatment Policies: EDI, bullying and harassment, case work, complaints, managerial training	Mutual respect, recognition of diversity benefits,

Methods

The research team proposed to complete a mixed method study for this piece of work, with a plan to engage with existing university documents and datasets as well as generate empirical data. In this section we outline our approach to collecting and generating data.

Empirical data generation involved ethnographic methods, drawing on the authors' personal membership of UCU Scotland and roles in their host institution UCU branch, engagement with publicly available social media and an online 'note boards' using Padlet software (Padlet, 2023).

As outlined in the introduction, UCU Scotland branches are involved in the national UCU dispute regarding employment conditions in HE (UCU, 2023). Actions in Scotland relating to this dispute include a marking and assessment boycott, and in response to consequent employer pay deductions some branches have engaged in strike action. Over the course of the three-month data collection and write up Glasgow also hosted UCU Congress which dominated much of UCU-related social media posts during the Congress and it in its immediate aftermath (27 May - Monday 29 May 2023).

The authors speculate that these issues, in combination with the issues the dispute centres on, have been contributing factors to a relatively low response rate to the online note board. The issues central to the industrial dispute have also featured heavily in the responses that UCU Scotland members outlined on the note boards, which are available in their unanalysed format in appendix A.1 and A.2.

University information

The authors accessed publicly-available policy and workforce information from Scottish Universities with active UCU branches including Aberdeen, Abertay, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Heriot-Watt, Highlands and Islands, Queen Margaret, Robert Gordon, St Andrews, Stirling, Strathclyde, West of Scotland and members from the Open University who work in Scotland. This was reviewed alongside data available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2023). Scottish universities represented include a range of university 'types' including research intensive universities and teaching-led institutions that have been established for a range of under 30 through to over 600 years.

Empirical data

Online data collection - Padlet

To invite members to post on the online Padlet note board the research team initially emailed the link to the branch contacts listed on the UCU Scotland directory. This invitation was repeated three times across the course of the funded time. The research team also shared the invitation via their own personal networks with fellow members. The use of shared media and social media is increasing in qualitative enquiry to notable success (Neo et al., 2022: Opara et al., 2021: Salmons, 2017).

Engagement continued to be limited throughout the course of the project and so the research team elected to create an additional note board that was shared on social media. This generated some concerns that this publicly accessible note board might be subject to misuse, but the responses reflect the content of the privately shared note board, and support project findings more broadly, which implies validity.

Participants were made aware that they could comment anonymously and in their own time. One online note board was shared via email and Whatsapp exclusively to UCU Scotland members and contained 86 posts from 20 individual contributors (Appendix A.1), the second was shared on Twitter and Facebook and contained 10 posts from 6 contributors (Appendix A.2). N=26.

Ethnographic methods

To ensure wider engagement the research team also used ethnographic methods to collect data. Ethnography is a valued and repeated method in trade union research (Connolly, 2020). This means the researchers used their positions as branch members to discuss the meaning of Fair Work in HE with fellow members. This included Whatsapp conversations, informal interviews/conversations (both in person and online), email communication and Twitter interactions. The researchers were clear when having these interactions that they were interested in member thoughts on the topic personally and for use as part of this project. The research team regularly discussed data collection and emerging findings throughout the project.

Project limitations

This research has a limited formal response rate. Authors have attributed this in part to the context within which the project took place, the multiple pressures on UCU members in Scotland, and the team's limited ability to develop communication pathways with members who do not engage with digital communication from UCU Scotland more broadly. UCU Scotland members from universities outside of Glasgow and Edinburgh are underrepresented in the presented data.

Findings

The below findings draw on the above rapid review conducted by the research team, ethnographic data including observation, informal and unrecorded interviews, online engagement and two shared online note boards. The key findings can be summarised as:

1) There is a consensus amongst active UCU Scotland members that the 5 elements of Fair Work as outlined by the Scottish Government encompass their views on fair work in Scottish Higher Education (HE).

2) UCU continues to be the central potential enabler of Fair Work being realised for members in their working lives.

3) Current perceptions and understandings of Fair Work in Scottish HE are dominated by the concerns central to the current industrial dispute between UCU nationally and HE employers. These include:
   a. Concerns about racism and tribalism (a tribal consciousness and loyalty that exalts a particular group above other groups) in Scottish HE workplaces.
   b. Ableism, particularly in relation to health and safety and the ongoing pandemic.

4) Key concerns within the Fair Work framework were dependent on job family and career stage. In particular:
   a. Early career academic concerns centred around security
   b. Professional services staff concerns focused on opportunities.

5) Issues related to employee voice focused on:
   a. University contracting and governance,
   b. Data collection and usage.

6) The consensus for what is currently 'unfair' about work in HE from UCU Scotland members maps onto literature and documentation generated by university employers, HESA and UCU. This includes:
   a. Low levels of disability disclosure,
   b. High levels of precarious and insecure working conditions,
   c. Dissatisfaction and resultant local and national disputes,
   d. Race and gender related pay differences,
   e. Limited progression opportunities for teaching staff and/or professional services colleagues.

Document review

Researcher review of HESA data and available data on university policies did not offer sufficient information to develop a consensus on Fair Work in Scottish HEs. This data confirmed, however, widely understood concerns that there is a low disclosure rate of disability in Scottish universities, continued sex, race and disability pay gaps and continued and excessive use of precarious employment practices including fixed-term and zero-hour contracts (Allmer, 2018; Gupta et al., 2016).

All represented universities provided evidence of formal pathways for employee voice, including trade union representation in university courts and senates as well as opportunities for anonymous feedback and regular provision of staff feedback surveys relating to research, teaching, workload and wellbeing. More information on these strategies can be provided by the research team on demand. Our recommendation is to do further research to explore whether these mechanisms for engagement are adequately reflecting effective voice mechanisms, and if not, why not.

Similarly, all universities represented by a UCU branch had organisational policies, strategies and processes to support respect in the workplace. Policy titles included 'Dignity and respect', 'bullying and harassment' and 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion'. Where respect was enshrined in policy, content aligned specifically with the Equality Act (2010), which represents the legal minimum and focuses on the protections of employees with protected characteristics. These are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. All the Scottish HE institutions with active UCU branches also required all employees to complete Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training. As with the above, researchers identified that the issue is not necessarily the existence of adequate provision, but its enactment.

This issue continued throughout university documentation. Scottish HE institutions are able to evidence robust, formal processes that align with most of the established and expanded elements of Fair Work as set out in Table 1 (page 3). There are clear promotion pathways, development resources, access to health resources, consultative processes, employee recognition strategies, performance management processes, data protection guidelines, health and safety provisions.

A subject requiring further exploration would be the topics that researchers were unable to find and/or access. In the second column of Table 1, which includes expanded social/non-material aspects of Fair Work elements we identified surveillance as a potential issue. This is of interest because Scottish HEs are increasingly digitising human resource processes, as they have previously digitised student engagement with course materials through online platforms such as My Place or Blackboard. These platforms collect large quantities of personal data, and we were unable to locate university information on if or how this data was collected, stored and/or analysed. This issue was noted in the project's corresponding ethnographic data collection, whereby UCU Scotland members expressed either a lack of knowledge that university platforms collected data or a level of distrust and concern regarding how it might be used and by whom.

In summary, the documents and extant data reviewed as part of this project did not expand or develop researcher understanding of Fair Work in the context in Scottish HEs other than to evidence a gap between the rhetoric presented by the employer institutions and the sentiments of UCU Scotland members as discussed below and illustrated by this member quote:

> *"'There is a difference between formal voice mechanisms and good faith in engaging with employee voice that is sometimes forgotten. It isn't just about having trade unions and employees in the room; it is about genuinely listening and responding. Of course, these relationships are two way, and unions/union members also have responsibilities to engage in constructive dialogue, but the tone is often set by university leaders and managers - and often not in a positive way."*

Member data

Employee voice

Employee voice findings from this study highlighted a concern for members in Scottish HE which was the misuse of appropriate systems by which employee voice is recognised. This related to senior management teams making financial decisions and/or procuring software for use across their institutions without working with elected bodies such as a senate or court. The subsequent impact of these decisions was identified as risking infringing on other elements of the Fair Work framework, including respect, security and opportunities.

> *"I would like the governance structures at the uni to be respected. Often management is deeming everything material to be outwith the jurisdiction of elected bodies such as the Senate or Court. This practice is making senior management teams unaccountable to anyone, allowing them to take on huge debt that jeopardises our institutions' financial security and therefore employees' job security. It also means that there are no consequences for when they embark on huge vanity projects contrary to the wished and expertise of the vast number of employees "consulted"."*

UCU members highlighted how they were often unaware of institutional decisions until they were officially announced. This included the procurement and application of financial management systems (that subsequently did not work), human resources systems developed from problematic assumptions relating to sickness, and the development of new buildings. UCU members highlighted how they were not party to any consultations on these large institutional decisions and had no recourse to challenge them.

Participants also commented that their concerns about health and safety relating to COVID-19 and its ongoing associated risks.

"I would like employee and union concerns about safety in the workplace, particularly over covid, but also over stress, to be listened to and greeted with more than hand gel and yoga. Numerous times our requests for better ventilation/HEPA filtrations that would make us all safer in the workplace have been denied because the employer is meeting the minimum standards required by the government. Those minimum standards are not protecting us. Requests for a reduction in stress caused by unmanageable workloads is met with would like to, but no money, do some exercise. It's a basic principle of fair work- that no one should go to work and come home injured as a result of an avoidable workplace incident."

Respect

Issues relating to respect in this project centred on how UCU Scotland members are positioned and viewed by employers. They also reflected the issues central to the UCU four fights dispute. These focused on race and disability, as well as job family and time in post. From our observations, racism, and also a form of tribalism were mentioned, often seen as 'old boys networks'. The perspective was taken that merit was based on connections made 'on the golf course' as members mentioned repeatedly, and that the more prestigious jobs would go to white, straight, male applicants. Equally, colleagues perceived it as disrespectful that they were continuously approached based on their externally ascribed identity to fill in the 'gaps' for EDI related committees, while rarely asked to represent in the more influential positions. A central concern expressed by members is that while being asked to provide representation in these performative ways, their actual needs relating to their home life and caring responsibilities were not adequately supported:

'People [employers] *need to think seriously about what respect really means in practice, and managerial processes and practices in universities need to embed respect. Respect for people's health and wellbeing; respect for their contribution and efforts; respect for their family/non-work life; and interpersonal respect. There are elements of conduct that don't support respect and bad behaviours that are tolerated rather than addressed and that contribute to a more stressful work environment.'*

Many members also raised their frustration about how they were treated post pandemic times. Many emergency measures established during the lockdown situation had been agreed, for example, in teaching simply due to lack of other options but are now made the famous new normal. The lack of respect for individual investment in teaching for example, or the lack of recognition for training and upskilling to keep track with new technology-driven changes is perceived as disrespectful. Empirical data showed that members viewed being required to be on campus, even when experiencing a long-term health condition was discriminatory and disrespectful, as was the lack of effort to provide HEPA filters in teaching and meeting rooms.

Participants also identified insecure working conditions as a form of disrespect. Data were clear that to continue to provide precarious contracts is to label some employees as disposable. This concern

extended to member understandings of prescriptive workloads and requirements, that implied a lack of managerial trust in their workforces.

Equally, based on our data and our longitudinal observational experiences from having participated in many meetings, pickets, rallies, the general 'value driven approach' pushed forward by Scottish Universities, the slogans, and every shiny building is seen as a passive-aggressive form of offence. In many Scottish HE institutions, trust seems to be lost, and the divide between employers and employees widened. These results, of course, reflect the perspectives of the most active members, but clearly every responsible Fair Work employer should be concerned. .

Security

Security as an element of Fair Work within this project was informed by the previously mentioned issues of precarious work defined by short, fixed term contracts in Scottish HEIs. Respondents also frame insecurity in their work in terms of respect, illustrating the interconnectness of the Fair Work dimensions:

> *'Extremely short-term contracts are disrespectful and show a lack of appreciation for the contributions of staff'*

A strong voice was recorded from the PGR community. Throughout the pandemic and into a cost-of-living crisis, they raised concerns about very basic security: To be paid for hours claimed; to be paid on time. Participants detailed the long-term impact insecurity had on their life outside of work, including their health and wellbeing:

> *'Job security (and a manageable workload) is the main thing I would like from work in HE - prolonged insecure work (we're not talking 2 years, we're talking 10+ years on 3-4 contracts at a time at different places, supervising students, teaching postgrad courses, lecturing, course organising) is absolutely horrible. It affects one's health, life planning, career, everything. Security should be the norm in fair work, not the exception (as it currently is in HE).'*

Fulfilment

Participants voiced a decline in fulfilment at work due to lack of recognition of the values they have despite them often being values that Scottish HEs claim to hold. A chief barrier to member fulfilment related to unmanageable workloads. Members were clear that this inhibited their ability to engage in the standard of excellence set out by HE employers:

> *'Having a workload model that leaves room for creativity and innovation, as the current, highly prescriptive and unrealistic one does not foster a sense of appreciation and trust in staff and is not conducive to exploring new projects.'*

There is a strong point made throughout the responses that there is an institutional lack of value placed on teaching, and a lack of recognition given to staff who focus on teaching. Alternatively, research-only staff reported feeling like 'cash cow(s)' and that they are not valued since they do not teach. Workloads, but specifically work-intensification (often not even visible in workload models) has led to participants feeling stressed and insecure, with no sense for fulfilment left anymore. In more general terms, data showed that university management groups are not trusted leading to a declining sense of worth for UCU Scotland members.

Respondents reflected on HEI employers making decisions about software procurement, especially in the context of software that captures employee data. There were also comments on recent national data breaches of organisations relevant to many HE workers in Scotland, such as the recent Capita data breach that has affected USS pension scheme members (USS Website, 2023). Data suggested that in the context of a Fair Work environment, HE employers would take responsibility for the financial safety and security of affected employees.

Members also reported feeling unfulfilled due to feeling ill-equipped to support students with contemporary issues such as scam housing; reports of harassment and racist abuse; private student accommodation ending contracts out of sync with PGR finalising their work.

Opportunities

The project note board received fewer responses relating to workplace opportunities from members than for any of the other four elements of Fair Work. Data collected on this element was largely responded to by early career academic members and those in professional services rather than those in more senior posts. The chief concern highlight by members was that HE contract work, both in research and teaching, was a constant barrier to development and subsequently limited their opportunities. Participants also reflected on the importance of providing departmental funding to retain post-doctoral workers to protect them from the inconsistency of large funding grants and delays in paperwork. An associated topic that was addressed by members was a perceived difference between internal and external recruitment. There was a shared perspective that Scottish HE employers preferred to recruit external candidates to research roles, rather than developing internal candidates and/or provide more secure contracts for those working on multiple short-term fixed contracts. This was described as worsening as the pressures for the Research Excellent Framework increased before submission.

Other concerns identified both through ethnographic and online data collection related to professional service colleagues. A regular issue here related to the limited opportunities for progression in this job family:

> *"As a professional services staff member there is a very strong sense of being a cog in a machine. Even if we excel in our roles, there are limits to how much we can develop within the role or org.*

Either we move into a management role or we stay under management's dictates, implementing yet another half-baked strategy. If the governance in the uni was more participative then we could feel like we were all working on the problems we face together. The staff turnover is high; the pay is low to mid relative to private sector roles."

A key suggestion from members to address this was that HE employers should engage in equitable and transparent promotion pathways for all contract types. Some members also discussed the benefit of in-role development and upskilling.

Further suggestions included incorporating time for employees to adapt to structural changes within an HE institution, irrespective of whether this was in response to external or internal drivers.

Conclusion

This project did not fully address the aims of the project as the researchers have yet to develop survey content due to the ongoing excess of UCU communications and fatigue experienced by membership. However, the project has addressed the research questions, which can be summarised below.

The Fair Work framework adequately accounts for the views of UCU members in Scotland on what Fair Work in HEs is. Through all elements of the data collection, the topics addressed by UCU Scotland members could be categorised within the framework. However, this project was fundamentally informed and overshadowed by the contemporary industrial dispute that members are engaged in, affecting both the formalised and recorded response rate and the content of those responses. It is also clear from the members observed as part of this study that at this moment in time UCU Scotland members do not believe that their employers are adequately enacting the Fair Work Framework.

UCU Scotland members have provided data that evidence the importance of employee voice in Fair Work in HE and provided important insights into how engagement could be improved in the sector. Key inhibitors to the realisation of Fair Work in Scottish HEs reflect wider concerns in the sector, and those driving the 'Four Fights' UCU dispute. UCU Scotland was situated as a central enabler of Fair Work in Scottish HEs – largely through the current dispute but also through branch level activism and engagement.

A further finding of the project relates to the ability of individual institutions to evidence active engagement with the Fair Work framework, comparably to how they can evidence meeting legal requirements relating to equality and diversity. However, peer-reviewed research, conducted at the standard required by HE institutions evidence that Scottish Universities are not meeting these aims, particularly in relation to disability (Remnant et al., 2023). Findings from this project strongly suggest that this same gap appears between institutional rhetoric and practice.

Research:

1) Authors suggest that UCU Scotland continue to circulate the project online note board links for further consensus development – especially when the current dispute is resolved.

Other agencies:

2) Engage with Scottish funders including the Scottish Funding Council regarding their Fair Work conditions for Scottish HEs.

UCU Scotland and branch action:

3) Develop strategies for UCU branches to have adequate representation in financial decision making and procurement.
4) Develop guidance/tool kit for members to engage strategically with University Courts/Senates – potentially form a legal case.
5) Confirm Post-Graduate Researcher UCU members as staff members, who reported high levels of insecurity and precarity in their paid work.
6) Continue to support branch Health and Safety representatives with COVID-19.
7) Continue to support branch Equality representatives.
8) Develop guidance for branches to engage with employers regarding data security and transparency regarding data collection and use by HE institutions.
9) Co-design continued research into member views on the gap between employer strategies and policies and their application in relation to the Fair Work Framework.

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Appendix

A.1 Fair Work in HEs private invite image (PDF available separately)

A.2 Fair Work in HEs social media invite image

:Padlet

jenniferremnant + 6 · 1mo

Fair Work in HEIs (Twitter)?

Note board for UCU Scotland members' thoughts on what Fair Work in Higher Education Institutions means. We have provided sections that reflect the dimensions of Fair Work as outlined by the Fair Work Convention, but please do not be limited by these. Please also feel free to contact researchers Jen Remnant and Kendra Briken with any further thoughts or questions. Their contact details will have been included in the email containing the link to this Padlet. By contributing to this note board you are agreeing to us analysing your contribution and using it in both our feedback to UCU Scotland, and potentially for academic publication. Please only provide job-family information where relevant to your comment and make a note of the region of Scotland you work in.

Employee voice	Respect	security	fulfilment	opportunities

Employee voice

Using senior management engagement sessions to actively listen to staff and respond with equanimity to criticism, even when they don't agree with it.

Add comment

Fair work also applies to professional services staff. I absolutely understand the pressure on academic colleagues, but thought it might be good to give PS view also.
I left my post in mid management in post 92 institution earlier this year - without another job lined up. The utterly unmanageable workload, with no support from my boss, became untenable.
60 hour weeks as norm, and then being asked to take on another person's role whilst they were off on maternity leave. This was 3 days per week in addition. I DO NOT hold any ill will to that colleague ; but the promised ´buy our' never came. Then I was berated for not being on top of certain aspects of my role, things being late, etc. I kept my manager updated and he simply said it all had to be done. I worked harder and harder. Then I burnt out.
This is all too common a scenario. You are good at your job, so things just keep getting piled on, until you break. I WAS good at my job, but failure of management broke me. Only now am I well enough to look for something else.
I am doubtful if it will be in HE, despite having been successful in that career for almost 15 years. I am so sad that the sector, and job, I loved is heading in this direction.

💬 2

👤 **Anonymous** 1mo
Oh and I'm in central Scotland.

👤 **Anonymous** 1mo
Glasgow area

Add comment

Safe and supportive opportunities for staff to express their views and engage with policies and changes, which are genuinely taken into account and instil trust in management's professed values.

Add comment

Respect

Having (mental) health issues acknowledged and limitations respected is vital - not being constantly referred to OH to query whether you meet the equalities act disability criteria or having a period of mental ill health reframed as 'poor wellbeing'

💬 1

👤 **Anonymous** 1mo
Academic - east Scotland

Add comment

Having our self-assessment of our capacity for (additional) work believed and accepted - despite what some managers think 'I don't have capacity for that right now' isn't the same as saying you just don't want to/can't be bothered to do it.

💬 1

👤 **Anonymous** 1mo
Academic - east scotland

Add comment

A place where loyalty to the job does not lead to falling financial security.

Add comment

security

Creating a sector where PGRs, early career academics & academic support staff have adequate hours & pay so they can plan ahead & focus on work without the worry & feelings of dread that precarious work causes.

For PGRs more specifically, having real job security will allow us to make more meaningful & timely progress on our thesis - meaning we can start full time (secure?) employment to pay into pensions, plan families & reduce precarity in other parts of life (such as housing).

Add comment

Knowing that you will have a job in 12m time. A fair place to work is somewhere that you can build a life around, find a home and family.

Add comment

fulfilment

Being supported and empowered to identify and undertake work activities that enable you to flourish, not just survive

💬 1

👤 **Anonymous** 1mo
Academic - east scotland

Add comment

opportunities

Opportunities to choose part-time, flexible or additional leave that is not tied to/assessed with regard to caring or other responsibilities.

💬 1

👤 **Anonymous** 1mo
Academic - east scotland

Add comment

There are no opportunities for professional services/academic related staff. No route to promotion other than applying for a new job.

Add comment