# SHEFFIELD UCU BULLETIN

University and College Union

## Lecture Capture

You could well imagine an authoritarian regime demanding all university lectures are recorded and collected in a central database. In a so-called liberal society we may go one step further. We can remove the accompanying expense of resourcing a well-staffed department of petty bureaucrats, who would trawl through all the recordings seeking evidence of subversive teaching. In a liberal regime this extra staffing is unnecessary. **We have already learnt to supervise ourselves and filter what we say and think.** A mandatory system of lecture capture will serve to reinforce and strengthen these pre-existing systems of self-censure. The university does so under the ideological cloak of enhancing the student experience.

This policy will further limit the already constrained spaces where critique and speculative thought are still possible, and positively encouraged. It will lead to the further homogenisation, or standardisation of the student experience, which will become less politically challenging and more and more tied to the production of biddable subjects, the kind of individual required in a society that wishes to continue without real challenge.

Lecturers will stand up and deliver ever more sanitised versions of themselves in the knowledge that they too are becoming superfluous. Here lecture capture speaks to a basic problem faced by the corporate university: The university needs teachers despite itself. **One of the noteworthy features of the contemporary university, which seeks to reduce expenditure and increase profit like any business, is that it faces a labour force that can only be diminished to a certain point.** As much as it may attempt to slim down operations earmarked for closure, cut out 'unnecessary' expenditure and lay off 'unnecessary' staff, its business model still

involves paying teachers to teach. This is where lecture capture offers an opportunity, not so much to do away with lecturing altogether, but reduce the dependency of a university on its teaching staff, who may leave the university but whose sanitised teachings can be played back on loop.

Arguments like this might strike some as alarming, perhaps alarmist. But lecturers may themselves wonder why they are standing up before an audience for yet another year, if what they said was already said clearly enough two years ago, and can still be accessed online. Lecture capture may well encourage a degree of ironic detachment from the process of teaching, which has been reduced to a form of delivery, or transmission because of the imposed format. **This may cause lecturers, administrators and students alike to misrecognise the nature of teaching, as if it were a matter of conveying undisputed parcels of information alone, though teaching is always, and irreducibly, also a moral, social and political enterprise.**

Make no mistake, the imposition of mandatory recording (even with an opt-out clause), asserts the value system of a moral and political order which has no patience for other conceptions of teaching. It rides roughshod over those who approach teaching as a space where dominant frameworks might be unsettled rather than meekly accepted.

## twitter

## Did closing the staff canteen lead to Brexit?

Long ago, when Inox Dine was but a twinkle in the Registrar's eye, there was a staff canteen in University House. This was where people went to eat a healthy, unfancy lunch with plenty of fresh

vegetables. The atmosphere was friendly. The queue moved quickly and service was fast. More importantly, this was a place where people mixed across departments and across faculties. It was not uncommon to see the Vice Chancellor with a tray at a nearby table.

The canteen closed in 2012 for renovations and
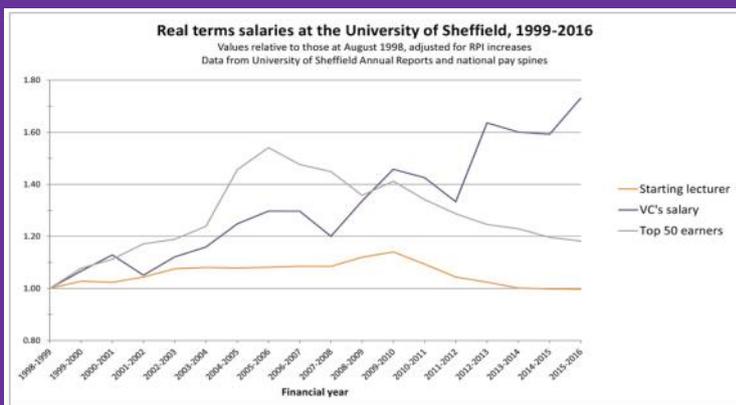
never reopened. In its place now sits a perennially empty fine-dining restaurant designed, it seems, for entertaining Important People. Those who had lunched in the canteen had to move on. As is becoming a trend at the university, thinking about the impact on staff isn't necessary if the institutional needs point elsewhere.

The closure of a canteen may seem trivial, but it is symptomatic of the how low a priority people have become in decision making. **Be it on pay or pensions, lecture-capture or Saturday working, REF or TEF, we are asked to modify our expectations for the good of the institution.** The business case is clear: you have to make sacrifices and work more productively for less if you want the university to flourish. And so, with staff struggling to make their voices heard, we are forced to accept pay erosion on an unprecedented scale and watch as the money is channelled into trophy buildings. We see pensions run into the ground with little defence. Potential redundancy lurks as reviews and restructures spring up everywhere we look. An unnecessarily casualised workforce worries about whether it will have work next semester.

The Vice Chancellor has written many good words about Brexit and seems troubled by an upswell in nationalism, encouraging people to see a commonality across borders. Yet, he overlooks the part he is playing where his influence is greatest. In authorizing decisions which treat staff as subordinate to the business need, he risks stoking the feelings of alienation and anger which are causing real problems to the fabric of society.



**Real terms salaries at the University of Sheffield, 1999-2016**
Values relative to those at August 1998, adjusted for RPI increases
Data from University of Sheffield Annual Reports and national pay spines

The government's recent Trade Union Bill puts major restrictions on the ability of unions to resist unfair treatment. With an increased swing of power in the Vice Chancellor's direction comes increased responsibility. If he is serious about reversing the trends feeding nationalism, he should re-examine the way his employees are treated. He could start by advocating fairer pay in the national negotiations. Then he could mourn the loss of the staff canteen.

# Metrics, Targets and the Drive to Fulfil the Plan

Back in 1988 a bemused conservative historian, Elie Kedourie, wondered 'why it should be thought right and necessary for universities to be submitted to a regime akin to that of a command economy is quite obscure'. He had spotted something important but didn't understand why or just how much neoliberal reforms of Higher Education would come to resemble aspects of Stalinist institutional practice.



Systematic state repression for dissent is fortunately not something we face in our work, worrying as the prevent agenda may be, and dangerous surveillance through lecture capture could potentially become if we are not very careful. The fetish for targets and drive to quantify everything is, however, certainly something that is shared. The Research Excellence Framework, REF has been a rich source of such phenomena, with ongoing audits to ascertain whether individuals and departments are on course to fulfil the faculty and institutional plan, to meet or, better still, exceed their allotted target now underway. Now the Teaching Excellence Framework, TEF, has been decreed, and while the University has still not confirmed it will participate fully, preparations to implement another set of production norms are well underway. New targets are being drawn up and the time and motion assessors are coming to engineer a production line near you.

**Metrics on research applications data, awards data, commercial income, number of PGR students, number of publications, citations and so on are already collected, but they now will be used directly 'to inform discussion about development, performance and, if appropriate, promotion cases'.** One department has already declared it will use such data to 'assign a traffic light coding system' designed to 'rank individuals alongside peers'. The top 'decentile' of Stakhanovite shock workers will be celebrated, while the bottom 'decentile' of laggards will be the ones who attract the most managerial attention. **Given rising concern over workloads and the number of cases we have had to deal with in which performance management has targeted people with disabilities, health problems and personal problems, this is worrying indeed.**

Management insists all such measurements will be but one element of a wider approach including ongoing conversations between managers and staff, placing a great deal of faith in the competence and integrity of managers that casework shows often to be seriously lacking. However much guidelines and processes are designed to mitigate the blunt nature of metrics and lessen the potential for managerial abuse, **history clearly shows that such all too easily comprehended and correlated data remains at the forefront of management concerns, while crucial but unquantifiable factors like professional integrity and collegiality are thrust into the shadows.** Instead corrosive, instrumental behaviour is encouraged, undermining the very basis of creative and productive activity. In these circumstances collective organisation of dedicated staff with an orientation on professional standards and staff wellbeing is essential.

# Academic Workloads

Workloads are a constant source of concern for members, and this is intensifying. For academic staff this often focuses on the so-called Workload Allocation Framework (WAF), whereby heads of academic departments divide tasks among staff. The suitability of any such system depends on the extent to which it brings transparency and equity of treatment to workload planning and ensures everyone is given a manageable load commensurate with job description and seniority. Unfortunately the current system routinely fails in all areas. Management regards the purpose of the WAF to be to ensure 'the collective activity of the academic staff group will support the delivery of the University, faculty and departmental strategies and plans,' making no connection to its statutory Duty of Care toward staff. **Thus, managers are pressed to ensure all strategies are implemented and plans are fulfilled regardless of the actual capacity of the workforce to meet these demands within limits that safeguard the mental and physical well-being of individuals.**

The vagueness of academic contracts often becomes an opportunity for managers to load up members of staff well beyond what can reasonably be expected to be achieved within their nominal 35 hours, requiring that they regularly exceed the hours they are actually paid for. Instead of providing a means by which workloads across the institution may consistently be predicted, measured and compared, departmental models vary considerably, and this is not simply because the 'size' of parallel functions vary across departments. There is, for example, no standard unit of measurement. In some departments it is the anticipated number of *actual* hours spent on a task that is used for planning, in others '*notional* hours' (ie proportion of the nominal, and generally fictitious, 35 hours) or even so-called 'Workload Units'. Levels of consultation with staff over drawing up allocation models and the frequency of revision of values according to the actual hours spent on tasks also vary significantly. Human Resources argues that by resisting imposing any consistency it seeks to respect the autonomy of departments, but this is surely disingenuous. In reality it provides a set of blinkers that obscure the abuses involved in the fulfilment of managerial plans.

**SUCU is pressing for a coherent and consistent University policy on workload allocation that makes managers accountable to agreed principles and provides recourse for staff whose wellbeing is threatened by their unmanageable workloads.** While there clearly needs to be flexibility for departments to account for the very different types and proportions of work across the institution, there needs to be a common unit of evaluation to enable consistency of approach to be maintained. The main purpose of workload allocation must be to ensure that everyone has a manageable workload that can be performed adequately within their contracted hours and, as far as is practicable, an equal load in terms of hourage proportionate to their percentage of FTE. The WAF values assigned to each task should be an estimate of the time the work is expected to take and should be subject to regular revision. **The fulfilment of institutional strategies and plans must be made dependant on the real capacities and wellbeing of the workforce, which means prioritising investment in staff.** The falling proportion of University expenditure on staff costs suggests the opposite is happening, and illustrates that increasing workloads are closely related to declining salaries, spending on landmark buildings and the commercialisation of Higher education more generally.

# EU Referendum

One year after the referendum on the European Union, Article 50 was triggered on the 29th of March 2017 when the UK officially notified the European community of its intent to leave. At this stage it is unclear what this process will mean for non-UK European citizens currently living in the British Isles, and conversely, UK citizens living in other European member states.

Just as control of immigration was a crucial topic in the debates on the European Union, it has continued to feature highly in the discussion of the future ties to the continent. The Prime Minister has made it clear that 'taking control' over immigration features highly on her agenda, but also said that she will make the agreement regarding the legal status of EU nationals in the UK 'a priority as soon as the negotiations begin' - rather than before. Amendments to the Brexit Bill passed by the House of Lords to unilaterally guarantee the rights of EU nationals were subsequently overturned in the House of Commons. Thus the Brexit Bill was kept 'straightforward', and retained the 'negotiating capital' over Britain's position to gain reciprocal arrangements for British nationals in the UK. Critics see this 'bargaining chips' approach as symptomatic of a wider lack of compassionate politics.

EU nationals living in the UK wishing to formalise their status need a residency permit; the Home Office admits that there is a large backlog of applications following greatly increased demand following the outcomes of the referendum last year. The application process cannot be called straightforward, as hopeful residents need to provide

details of home addresses, employment and all travel outside the UK for the qualifying five years, and pay a £65 application fee. An online version of the application form (which in paper runs to otherwise 85-pages) has been launched recently, presumably to speed up the process of assessment. As a recent [legal briefing showed](#), the Home Office was recently granted new and stronger powers, and subsequently the [rejection rate of applications recently hit 28 percent](#).

The lesser known issue of the 'comprehensive sickness insurance' (CSI) also recently resurfaced; this is a requirement that students and self-sufficient persons should have comprehensive sickness insurance have if they wish to qualify for right of residence in the UK. It is rather unhelpful that in this issue the Home Office guidance seems to go against the practice of the NHS, given that the former requires EU students to have an EHIC card from their home countries, and the latter produces [UK EHIC](#) cards for them. The issues deriving from not having the CSI could affect spouses of staff who are EU citizens and are not in employment, or many of our EU students who have not acquired extra insurance in the UK or in their home countries; [as reported by a Polish student](#):

*Throughout my time as a student I was not aware of the requirement for CSI. I've just been told to go and register with the nearest GP by the university.*

It is currently unclear what format a post-Brexit registration process would take. Further, there is only speculation that a cut-off date might be set before which the rights of EU citizens would be guaranteed. Staff and students at our institution are likely to face continued uncertainty over their future in the UK in the coming months (or years?).

*Our union has partnered with Bindmans immigration law experts to provide advice to both EEA and non-EEA nationals, including partners and dependents of members. The union has also waived the three months waiting period for new members in gaining advice for the legal scheme. The FAQs on UCU's website contains information on how members can get personalised advice. ([www.ucu.org.uk/we-are-international](http://www.ucu.org.uk/we-are-international) & [http://bit.ly/2kWgvyZ](http://bit.ly/2kWgvyZ))*

*The University of Sheffield has recently offered legal support from Penningtons Manches to provide advice to EU staff. Further, the University offers to reimburse the permanent residency cards (£65) for its EU staff, backdated to 23rd of June 2016. Further information can be found on the EU advice website ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/eu-advice](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/eu-advice)).*

# NSS Boycott

Sheffield's response rate to the NSS is down a massive 22% on last year's figures at the time of writing, following the national NUS campaign for a boycott.

25 Students' Unions across the country have campaigned for the boycott at a local level, including Sheffield. The SU and Sheffield UCU released a joint statement earlier this year as part of the [Sheffield Better Than TEF](#) campaign, saying:
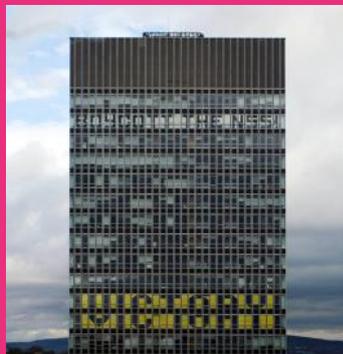
> *Sheffield University Students' Union and Sheffield University and College Union believe that students should boycott the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS will become a key element of the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework according to which teaching will be evaluated according to a set of centrally imposed metrics that threaten to reduce education to narrowly conceived vocational training..*

In early March the SU Education Officer, Ali Day, spoke to members at a general meeting where she highlighted the three aims of the campaign locally: to connect with a mass audience, provide a dedicated website for the campaign (linked above) and connect the campaign with academic colleagues and societies.

Posters promoting the boycott have been visible on campus and at bus stops around the city. At the end of March activists used the Arts Tower to spread the message even more widely.

NSS data isn't publishable externally unless the minimum response rate threshold, 50%, is reached. As of mid-April, the institutional response rate was 44% – so the University has no accurate, up-to-date data to feed into external league tables for 2017/18.

Arts and Humanities lead the boycott, with just a 25% overall response rate. They have four of the five departments who have responded most successfully to the boycott, all with response rates of less than 20%. The best-boycotted department is Architecture, with a response rate of less than 10%. Final year students who have completed the survey but wish to withdraw their responses can do so by completing the form at **nus.org.uk/NSSregret**

**The data that has already been gathered can and will be used internally – but it will be increasingly difficult for management to claim convincingly that this year's NSS data is an accurate reflection of students' views, given the low turn-out.** The Sheffield boycott succeeded in keeping the overall response under 50% and has therefore struck a solid blow against marketisation and the TEF locally. Congratulations and solidarity to all those who have supported the boycott across the University.

(photo credit: [@freeunisheff](#))