Further information on industrial action

Why is this Industrial action happening?

The University and College Union (UCU) has asked its members to take industrial action. This is a national dispute which centres on proposals to make changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension scheme. The scheme faces very large deficits in its funding, making it difficult to sustain for the future. As a result Universities UK (UUK), the body which represents UK universities (including the University of Edinburgh), has proposed to change the way in which benefits are calculated for members of the pension scheme. This will address the problem of the deficit over time but will reduce the benefits of staff members in future years. There will still be a staff pension scheme, staff benefits accrued to the date of change will be maintained, and the University will continue to pay 18% employer contributions into the new scheme. However many UCU members are very unhappy with the loss of defined benefits going forward.

You can read the Universities UK position on this issue at:


You can read more about the UCU position at University and College Union

What Industrial action is planned?

UCU opposes the proposed change to the USS, and has asked members to take part in a series of strikes on the following dates:

**Week One:** Monday 26, Tuesday 27 and Wednesday 28 February 2018

**Week Two:** Monday 5, Tuesday 6, Wednesday 7 and Thursday 8 March 2018

**Week Three:** Monday 12, Tuesday 13, Wednesday 14, Thursday 15 and Friday 16 March 2018

**Week Four:** Monday 19 and Tuesday 20 March 2018

Why isn't the University prepared to negotiate further with the unions on the pension issues?

As this is a national dispute involving hundreds of higher education employers, the University of Edinburgh is not free to resolve this dispute on its own, or with its own staff. However we are very pleased to note that negotiations between Universities UK (for the employers) and UCU have resumed in March and that there is an agreement to involve the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) in the next stages.
What was the ACAS proposal and why have the UCU rejected it?

Talks between Universities UK and UCU began at ACAS on Monday 5 March 2018 following discussions that started in January 2017. An agreement was reached on Monday 12 March 2018 between Universities UK (UUK) and the University and College Union (UCU) on the proposals. Full details of the agreement reached between UCU and UUK under the auspices of ACAS can be found at:

http://www.employerspensionsforum.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/ucu-uuk-agreement-acas-12-march.pdf

Both parties agreed to a transitional benefit arrangement which maintains a meaningful level of defined benefits for all scheme members up to a £42,000 salary threshold. More than 50% of USS members would continue to have a fully defined benefits pension. The transitional arrangement would take effect from 1 April 2019 and last for 3 years. To achieve this interim solution both employers and members would have been required to pay higher contributions. This includes a total employer contribution of 19.3% of salaries and a total member contribution of 8.7%. Given the concerns raised by some employers and UCU about the scheme’s valuation methodology and assumptions an agreement was reached between UCU and UUK to convene an independent expert valuation group.

On Tuesday 13 March 2018 the University and College Union (UCU) membership rejected the proposals, which would have ended the university pensions strike. The union said the strikes and action short of a strike remain on, and that it would now make detailed preparations for strikes over the assessment and exam period. UCU is calling for urgent negotiations with the universities’ representatives Universities UK aimed at resolving the dispute.

The University appears to have made a large surplus last year; so why can’t it pay more into the pension scheme?

The University is in a generally strong position but, as noted above, this is not a University of Edinburgh dispute but a national dispute, and so the question is ultimately how much all the employers, as a sector, are able to pay.

With regard to surplus at the University: although the University’s headline surplus figure reported for 2016/17 was £125 million, much of the surplus related to unrealised gains on investments. The unrestricted surplus, ie money actually available to the university to use, was around £51 million, (on a turnover of £929 million).

All Universities need to generate surpluses which can be re-invested to further improve their teaching and research activities. We plan significant investment over the course of the next 10 years, so the £51 million unrestricted surplus last year needs to be seen in the context of those plans - including our recent announcement of over £200m in student facing facilities.
Teaching

Will the industrial action affect my studies?

The industrial action means that some teaching staff may decide not to work on designated strike days. This means that they may not take part in delivery of teaching (e.g. lectures, seminars, tutorials, laboratory sessions and fieldwork), or undertake marking or provision of feedback. Other staff within your School may also be UCU members and so may be unavailable during the strike action.

Not all staff are members of UCU, and, to date the impact of the action has varied considerably, with some areas experiencing less impact than others. We do not yet know the likely extent of further action, or the impact of the mitigating steps that different Schools are putting in place to support students.

It is also important to note that the University remains open as usual during the action and many academic and support activities continue to operate as normal.

The University worked hard to prepare for this action and continues to seek to ensure that the impact on students is minimised while at the same time maintaining high academic standards.

Will my lectures/seminars/tutorials/ laboratory sessions and other teaching take place as planned?

Since the start of the action, Schools have been working hard to ensure the impact on your studies is minimised, but some scheduled teaching has regrettably had to be cancelled. Your School will continue to aim to inform you in advance of any teaching which may be cancelled and seek to provide alternatives if possible. In some cases, however, this information may not be available to Schools in advance as staff are not required to tell us in advance.

Even if your lecturer has told you in advance that they will be on strike, that doesn’t necessarily mean that the lecture / seminar etc will not take place - your School may arrange cover for the absent lecturer. If you are in any doubt as to whether a lecture / other teaching event is cancelled, you should attend to see if the event is on.

Studying

Am I expected to continue with my studies as normal?

Yes. You should work on the basis that your studies will continue as normal, unless you are told otherwise. This means that you should aim to attend scheduled teaching, complete and submit assessments by the relevant deadlines, and continue to plan for any examinations.
Should I submit my coursework?

Where you have been set coursework, you should work towards submitting this on time, as usual, and work on the assumption that normal penalties will continue to apply to late or non-submission of coursework. This includes deadlines falling on planned strike days.

Am I expected to attend classes that involve assessment?

Yes. For some courses, attendance and participation in classes contributes to the overall assessment for the course, and some students will have other assessment activities such as presentations scheduled during the period of industrial action. You are expected to attend these classes if they are running.

What happens if I am uncomfortable with crossing a picket line?

Where your scheduled teaching and assessment events are going ahead as planned, you are expected to attend as usual. While the University recognises that some students may choose not to cross a picket line to attend teaching and assessment events, we will be unlikely to be able to offer alternate teaching and assessment events for these students.

Where an assessment is due to be submitted on a strike day and students are required physically to hand in that assessment, Schools will allow late submission (on the next non-strike day) for students unwilling to cross a picket line. However this does not apply if submission can be made electronically.

What should I do if any of my scheduled teaching activities are cancelled?

If any of your scheduled teaching time is cancelled, you should use available course resources (for example, resources on Learn, course reading lists) to continue your learning for your courses. You should work on the basis that subsequent scheduled teaching activities will go ahead as normal, unless you are told to the contrary by your School Office / Teaching Organisation.

Will the industrial action affect the courses I can take next session?

In some areas, it is necessary to pass specified courses in order to have the knowledge and skills that are pre-requisites for taking particular courses in the next session. Where any cancellation of teaching means that content needed for next year's courses is missed this session, Schools will, if necessary adjust the content in next session’s courses. As long as you pass the work that you are assessed on this session, your freedom to take the courses you choose for next session will not be affected.
Other issues

Can I get a refund for any cancelled classes?

We will not know, in advance of the industrial action, which classes will be affected and for how long - although we can ask staff if they plan to take action, staff are not required to tell us in advance. However we expect the impact of the action to vary across the University and to very limited in some areas. If activities are cancelled, the University will make every reasonable effort to mitigate the impact, whether that is delivering content through alternative means or attempting to recover the lost activity at a later date. The University will also ensure that students are not disadvantaged academically by the industrial action. For example assessment deadlines may be extended to allow more time for students to complete; exam boards can be given instructions on how to ensure that students are not penalised as a result of the action.

Who can I contact if I can’t get hold of my Personal Tutor during the industrial action?

You should contact the Student Support Team in your School, who will be able to provide you with support. If you are a Visiting Student in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences the College’s Visiting Student Office will be able to provide you with support.

Can I still access the library/support services (e.g. Counselling, Disability)?

Yes. We do not anticipate disruption to library or support services, so you should continue to access these as needed.