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**Strikes at five colleges this week with progress in some disputes**  
  
UCU members at West Thames College, South Bank College, Croydon College, Bradford College and Harlow College were on strike this in a row over pay. The union said those colleges only had themselves to blame for the [latest wave of disruption](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8005/1/?c73c8e04=Y2FtcGFpZ251cGRhdGU%3d&60bc612e=X2FsbC1tZW1iZXJz&560a3889=VGhlIEZyaWRheSBlbWFpbDogMjIgTWFyY2ggMjAxOQ%3d%3d&x=6fcf7752) as a number of other colleges either reached agreement with the union to end the dispute or had made enough progress to allow for the strikes to be suspended.

[FE Week](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8006/2/) reported UCU's warnings that where strikes had been suspended, further disruption was likely if colleges' statements of intent need were not matched by actions in further negotiations. While [Tes](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8007/3/" \o "Opens in a new window" \t "_blank) picked up on UCU's frustrations at those colleges who had refused to engage with Bradford in particular coming in for criticism.

UCU head of further education Andrew Harden told Tes: 'Strike action is always a last resort and we are pleased that some colleges have worked with us to prioritise their staff and avoid disruption for students. We have always said colleges who engage with us on the pay and conditions of their staff will get a positive hearing and we are extremely frustrated that some chose not to do this.

'Bradford's refusal to even hold talks until next month sends a terrible message to staff and students about where the college's priorities lie. Where we have suspended action, colleges need to continue to work with us or we will have no option but to call further action.'

The strikes are part of a third wave of action after UCU members at six colleges [took action in November](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/7218/4/) and staff at 12 colleges [walked out at the end of January](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8008/5/). The dispute centres on the [failure of college bosses](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/7246/6/?c73c8e04=Y2FtcGFpZ251cGRhdGU%3d&60bc612e=X2FsbC1tZW1iZXJz&560a3889=VGhlIEZyaWRheSBlbWFpbDogMjIgTWFyY2ggMjAxOQ%3d%3d&x=a5ae270a) to make a decent pay offer to staff or address key issues such as excessive workloads.

**Report reveals positive benefits of international students**

Responding to a [report from the Higher Education Policy Institute](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8009/7/) on the tax and national insurance contributions international students who stay in the UK to work after their studies, [UCU said](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8010/8/?c73c8e04=Y2FtcGFpZ251cGRhdGU%3d&60bc612e=X2FsbC1tZW1iZXJz&560a3889=VGhlIEZyaWRheSBlbWFpbDogMjIgTWFyY2ggMjAxOQ%3d%3d&x=ada67df2) the report highlighted UK higher education's standing on the international stage and drew attention to the fact that international students' contribution is not simply economic.

UCU acting general secretary Paul Cottrell said: 'It is a testament to our higher education sector that, despite ministers' best efforts to create a hostile environment, we remain a popular destination. The government needs to look at how we ensure the UK remains a leading choice for international students or we risk jeopardising our proud standing on the world stage.'

**Warnings that Scottish universities are "in decline"**

Scottish universities are "in decline" according to a major international study on higher education. The [report](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8011/9/), published by the European Universities Association (EUA), said the sector in Scotland was "under pressure" because of the pace of funding cuts.

Researchers, who compared levels of public funding across Europe, said the situation in Scotland was in "sustained decline" alongside countries such as Italy, the Czech Republic and Serbia. UCU Scotland official Mary Senior described the report to the [Herald](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8012/10/) as a "wake-up call" to ministers.

Mary said: 'If we want world class universities that continue to provide excellent teaching and research, and ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed, then that takes investment, and ministers can't afford to ignore the warnings outlined in this report. Scotland can compete with the best internationally, but if we are continue to do so we must act quickly to reverse what this report describes as a declining system.'  
  
Mary also [provided an update on the Scottish Public Pensions Agency (SPPA) announcement](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8033/11/?c73c8e04=Y2FtcGFpZ251cGRhdGU%3d&60bc612e=X2FsbC1tZW1iZXJz&560a3889=VGhlIEZyaWRheSBlbWFpbDogMjIgTWFyY2ggMjAxOQ%3d%3d&x=ad786796) stating that the employer pension contribution increases will now only take effect from 1 September 2019 and not 1 April 2019.   
  
**Coventry University under fire for closures plan**

Coventry University was under pressure this week over plans to close two research centres. The UCU branch organised an Alternative Open Day protest where members spoke out against the potential closure of the centres at the which have put 53 jobs at risk.

PhD students demanded to know if researchers were at risk and spoke to the [Coventry Observer](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8013/12/) about the huge sacrifices they had made to study under their preferred academics at the university.

Thomas Coleman said: "I packed up my life, leaving my 10-year-old daughter with my parents in the USA, borrowed over $20,000, and flew over 4,000 miles across the Atlantic for one reason and one reason only—to study under my chosen academics at Coventry University's Brain, Belief, and Behaviour Research Lab.

PhD student Kyle Messick said: 'When it comes to how this change could impact me, the result could be devastating. I am not meant to defend my thesis until around September, however, I've been told that all three of my supervisors might be fired in July, and I won't even find out until the end of March. Not only do these actions show a disregard for students and their well-being, but they also show a great disrespect for our supervisors.'

**Keele UCU members demand to see rationale behind cuts**

[UCU members at Keele University are demanding](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8034/13/) the university provides evidence of why cuts putting 150 jobs at risk are necessary. The local branch told the Stoke Sentinel plans to make £8 million of cuts will have a "[severe impact](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8015/14/)" on staff and students.

In a statement, the local branch said: 'How can a university which has seen its income grow by more than 60 per cent in the last decade now, for the second year in a row, find itself having to drastically cut its workforce as a result of predictable short-term pressures? These cuts will undermine Keele's standing as a university of national and international reputation and its benefit to its current students and local, national and international communities.'

UCU is working with other unions to fight the cutbacks and students have also launched their own campaign group to support their lecturers' jobs.

**Strike ballot opens at Writtle University College in pay row**

 A strike ballot opened at Writtle University College on Tuesday in a [row over pay and conditions](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8035/15/?c73c8e04=Y2FtcGFpZ251cGRhdGU%3d&60bc612e=X2FsbC1tZW1iZXJz&560a3889=VGhlIEZyaWRheSBlbWFpbDogMjIgTWFyY2ggMjAxOQ%3d%3d&x=03561a33). It closes on Monday 8 April. UCU wants Writtle to commit to meaningful negotiations on pay, which has fallen by 21% in real terms over the last decade. The union also wants concrete action to tackle a gender pay gap of 14%, excessive workloads and the difficulties faced by staff without a secure contract.

UCU regional official Jane Thompson said: 'Staff have concerns about the falling value of their pay, spiralling workloads, pay inequality and the continued casualisation of the workforce. Staff want these important issues to be taken seriously and that includes the 21% loss in the value of pay since 2009, which a 2% pay offer, deferred until July, does nothing to address.'  
  
**Assessing the quality of mentorship in research environments**  
  
Please [take part in this study](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8036/16/) into the quality of mentorships in research institutions.    
  
**UCU forces Liverpool John Moores University u-turn on workload allocation**

UCU members at Liverpool John Moores University have forced the university to withdraw a planned controversial system for allocating workload. The management proposed changes that UCU argued would have seen staff lose their right to adequate research time and lead to a further increase in workloads. UCU said the system was not fit for purpose and was about to run an indicative ballot for industrial action. In the face of that opposition and the threat of the ballot, the university has now taken the proposal off the table and it will not be implemented.

**Education under siege: the experience of universities in Gaza**

Thursday 11 April (6.30-8pm) at the UCL Institute of Education, London. In the latest event co-hosted by [Fobzu,](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8017/17/" \o "Opens in a new window" \t "_blank) come and hear Dr Mona Jebril (Cambridge University) talk about her doctoral research on the impact of the siege and conflict on higher education in Gaza. The event will be chaired by Nita Sanghera, UCU vice-president and [more details and registration are here.](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/8018/18/)

**UCU apprenticeship policy event, Tuesday 2 April**

On Tuesday 2 April, UCU will host a discussion event in Westminster looking at apprenticeships policy and how to ensure apprenticeships are a high-quality, accessible and attractive option for young people. Chaired by UCU vice-president Nita Sanghera, the event will run from 5pm - 6.15pm in Westminster and feature input from shadow skills minister Gordon Marsden, UCU FEC vice-chair Sean Vernell, Professor Alison Fuller and Ian Pretty from the Collab Group. [If you wish to attend please register here.](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/7966/19/)

**UCU LGBT+ research conference**

UCU's LGBT+ research conference will be held at the University of Manchester on Friday 17 May. [You can find more information including online registration here.](https://list.mercury.ucu.org.uk/t/71288/27493259/7427/20/?c73c8e04=Y2FtcGFpZ251cGRhdGU%3d&60bc612e=X2FsbC1tZW1iZXJz&560a3889=VGhlIEZyaWRheSBlbWFpbDogMjIgTWFyY2ggMjAxOQ%3d%3d&x=06ad209d)