

# HIGHER EDUCATION IS A PUBLIC GOOD - NOT JUST A COST TO BE MANAGED



## A Trade Union Response to Management

In a communication to all staff on 1st December, GCU Principal Stephen Decent shared GCU management's views on Student Recruitment and Associated Investments.

We welcome this and the commitment to discuss any and all of these matters. Below you will find some of our views and reasoning as to why we believe GCU management and GCU Court need to own the current situation we are in, and need to take urgent measures now as well as repositioning our university for a different course in future. **We suggest an early New Year all staff open discussion between the Principal and campus trade unions, chaired by the Chair of Court.**

## Scottish Code of Good Higher Education Governance - The Court must:

'Be involved in the development of, take responsibility for, and monitor performance against the institution's strategic plan, which sets the aims and objectives of the institution and identifies the financial, physical and staffing strategies necessary to achieve the objectives.' (Clause 3)

'Ensure... the quality of the institution's education provision and adequate provision for the general welfare of students'. (Clause 12)

**Evidence given in this brochure suggests that there is cause for concern.**

## Finances

**Management say they have 'increased confidence in our finances', so why are staff continually being denied a pay rise?**

Staff costs and student fees seem to be the main factors raised in the message from management. But GCU is in a workload crisis now, - one that has been developing for years. It is going to take decisive action to address it. We cannot afford to hear the wrong answer to the right question: how to tackle the crisis in pay and conditions?

We have staff too overworked to change and refine modules, so they subsequently have to deal with many students failing, all of which increases staff workloads through 2nd diet attempts. Proposed changes to the academic year would heighten this problem and make it virtually impossible for some staff to take annual leave.

We have staff trying to support students as a personal tutor, handling up to 50 students and feeling anxious and upset they may be missing student disclosures of violence, abuse, or addiction. No individual staff member can give good quality, meaningful support to that volume of students.

Tutorial classes for some modules are running at 30-40 in a class, which is not good pedagogy for small group processes. It is stated that staffing levels have increased, yet each school has one person in a professional support role for PhD students and in SHLS that person is part-time.

**One person for an entire school.**



## GCU New York

**Management: 'We have come from a situation last year where the University had been prioritising our New York campus and growing international student numbers into our Glasgow and London campuses'**

Campus Unions believe that management and Court should take responsibility for the outrageous sums of money sunk into GCUNY – in excess of £25m – with the Court largely silent. Only the staff reps and TU reps on Court voted consistently against such excesses.

A review of the GCUNY decisions has been promised, with lessons to be learned. Only the trade unions consistently argued against Court on these matters. We cannot find ourselves in such a position again, so a review needs to consider decision-making and accountability. Some may wish to have a period of reflection on their own decisions and/or silence.

**According to the Principal: 'As you know, I have wanted us to take a different approach to New York and we will soon exit from that campus'**

**Campus unions welcome this.**

## Our student population

**Management talks about: 'The situation arising from changes to our student population...'**

We say the situation does not 'arise' with the students, or changes in the student population, but from the long-term mismanagement by the university Executive Group which has failed to be challenged robustly at Court.

This has been a collective failure in leadership.

Staff working conditions have been eroding for years – UCU has taken industrial action on Four Fights, which includes workloads, equality, casualisation and pay for over 5 years – so this is not a problem arising simply from very recent UK visa changes. Other campus unions have also been involved in Industrial Action over this period.

Many of our staff are no longer willing to keep giving for no extra pay, thanks or support. Some staff are so unable to keep giving their all, that they are off sick, the rates of which our senior management should be ashamed.

## Rates of sickness at GCU

**'Psychological' reasons are our number 1 sickness absence reason at 39 percent compared to a sector average of 26 percent.**

Working days lost at GCU have now increased to 9 days per FTE compared to 7 last year and average days absent are much higher than the sector – 10.2 days compared to 6.7 days for all UK Higher Education Institutions. Our percentage of long-term sickness absence is just over 72 percent compared to 54 percent for the sector. These are figures of which our senior management should be ashamed.

For GCU, the FTE number of days lost to 'psychological' sickness absence has increased by 38 percent since 2021-22. Last year there were 166 separate instances of psychological sickness absence with 130 individuals in the period absent for this reason.

The increase in casual hours staff to plug gaps is an unacceptable response to cover growing cracks. It's shameful since such working conditions are detrimental to people being able to live a flourishing life with dignity.

**GCU cannot keep using band-aids to treat a serious illness.**

## Our staffing crisis

**Our university has the 4th worst student staff ratio in the UK. We are in a staffing crisis and we need crisis measures.**

**The Principal states that staff 'are working hard and collegially' but we're doing more than that. UCU figures show that on average staff work an extra two days per week in the UK**

We note the acknowledgement that it is staff working so hard that is preventing the system from collapsing. But the continued reality is staff are doing more than working hard and collegially.

GCU is the only university to achieve the SFC undergraduate student recruitment targets this year, and has seen a 30% increase in students from SIMD20 areas (areas of 'multiple deprivation') yet has excellent 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> year retention rates.

This is welcome for a Civic University / University for the Common Good - but it has repercussions for staff.

Whilst UWS still takes on slightly more students from SIMD20 backgrounds, it is the hard work of our staff that ensures GCU ranks higher as regards retention from 1st to 2nd year of undergraduate study.

The above is only due to the work of our staff - academic, and professional and support staff.

We need emergency action now - our staff cannot continue to work in the manner in which they are working at present.

## Let's talk figures (1)

**The Management message on staff numbers is that 'Our total academic staff numbers have increased by 4.5% since January (against 1.9% student number growth)'**

We say comparing percentages of two different populations is like comparing Apples and Pears. Quite frankly, staff wouldn't accept this in an undergraduate essay. The **implication** is that, things have got better..... which our UK ranking on staff student numbers (4<sup>th</sup> worst) undermines, and the sickness absences of staff undermines. Not all staff recruited are directly involved with teaching. Plus any promotion to management or senior management may actually mean less teaching might be done. Staff numbers can go up but the workload on teaching and professional and support staff can increase nevertheless.



## Let's talk figures (2)

**Management states that in total, the growth of the student population on our Glasgow campus this year has been 100 students**

Such a blunt, aggregate number belies staff experiences at the coal face of delivery and support. Such a short-term, simplification of statistics is **frankly inadequate**.

As early as 2020, our staff student ratio was **already** amongst the worst in Scottish post 92 universities. For the last two years, the UCU January poster has had as its headline New Year Resolution 'Get my workload sorted'.

Using only the headline number of students is a blunt way to describe a situation that is much more complex, as management should well know.

The type of students, their support needs and the administrative requirements all add to workloads. Neither does this overall number acknowledge the differential effects in different departments and amongst different cohorts of professional and support staff.



## Let's talk figures (3)

**Management says: The total number of employees at GCU has increased in the past year and is now higher than at any point in the past 10 years**

If this is aiming to suggest 'nothing to see here, please move along', it's not acknowledging the increased workload as shown by staff student figures, nor the increased stress and sickness figures mentioned earlier.

## Speed of recruitment of new staff

**Management states that the speed at which we do this is restricted by our loss of income from the drop in international student numbers and our growth in staff costs.**

The implication here is that it's all the problem of international student numbers going down and also of..... costly staff.

**GCU New York legacy anyone?...**

## What wasn't in the statement (1)

**The Management statement talked about a refresh of University Strategy - but there was no mention of research.**

There is currently a refresh of the University Strategy, including for research. We wonder how management expect research to increase or indeed even happen when staff workloads are at crisis point?

Research bids take time, impact work takes time, publishing 4\* papers takes time. When will any of this happen if workloads are not brought down?

A standard academic (Teaching and Research) contract should have time for research, and not be a case of as and when you can squeeze it in on your evenings and weekends as you ignore your family.

**There are clear equality issues if this is our implicit model for research.** Research impact case studies generate millions for the University, but such work needs to be invested in over years as staff cannot 'magic' impact overnight.

## What wasn't in the statement (2)

**GCU London is praised for being successful in recruitment and particularly international recruitment.**

Staff in London talk of a situation where increased pressures mean staff are over-committed, and under resourced.

We are not just a Glasgow campus. We cannot just expect GCU London to absorb more and more international students in order to balance the current and future books without substantial and detailed investment in our hard working staff in London.

The Common Good has to stretch to our staff South of the border as well and the democratic deficit in getting their voice heard also needs tackled urgently.

## What wasn't in the statement (3)

**The words 'Professional and Support Staff'**

To say this is so disappointing and de-motivating is an understatement.

**Without us there is no university.**

## What we suggest

**The Principal's approach of inviting staff to comment on management's positions is welcome. The points made in this broadsheet are made from a position of constructive criticism from staff who believe profoundly in the concept of the University for the Common Good. We find the difference between the concept and the practice one that needs bridged and needs actions now to bridge it.**

**We suggest the Principal calls an open meeting for all staff, perhaps chaired by the Chair of Court, with representatives of all the campus trade unions also invited on the platform in order to discuss in a collegiate manner, the very important issues raised in managements e-mail to all staff on December 1st.**

**Surely that would be a good New Year's resolution and a good way to start the University for the Common Good on a new, constructive path.**