

Opposing compulsory redundancies at the University of East Anglia

We print here the text of a statement/open letter issued by UEA unions early in March as part of a petition. Since then the vice chancellor of UEA has resigned.

Dear David Richardson (Vice-Chancellor), Christine Bovis-Crossen (Provost and Deputy Vice-Chancellor), and Ian Callaghan (Chief Resource Officer),

We, the undersigned, as alumni, students, staff, members of the public, and of partner organisations of the University of East Anglia, are writing to express our grave concern regarding proposed compulsory redundancies at the University.

We have been alarmed to learn that the University is in such severe difficulty. We recognised that the pandemic presented major challenges for UK universities. However, it is notable that the Vice-Chancellor (VC) of UEA - having briefly taken a pay cut in 2020 - **is understood to have re-instated his full pay in early 2021**, which could presumably only have happened if the University was doing well. The VC of UEA now earns a salary of £283,000, which represents a 9.7% pay rise from £258,000 in 2020/21 and over 12 times the median salary at UEA.[1] Meanwhile, the real terms pay of university employees has **declined by approximately 25% since 2009**, [2] while workloads have soared and casual and short-term contracts have been normalised across the sector. For context, the median wage of the average Unison member - the Union that represents professional services staff and other groups at the UEA - is £19,612.[3]

UEA is a major employer in Norfolk, as well as being a Civic University and an Anchor Institution with a stated commitment to working with partners to improve quality of life across the region. Compulsory redundancies at the University will not only be

devastating for the individuals who will lose their livelihoods, but will also be 'catastrophic for Norfolk' as noted by County Councillor Emma Corlett in a meeting of Norfolk County Council. The proposal will have major financial, socio-economic, cultural and reputational ripple effects for the region, with geographically mobile employees of the University already seeking employment elsewhere. Grant income to both the University and the region will likely plummet; prospective students will think twice about choosing UEA.

The current levels of uncertainty created by the University's Executive Team about the future of the institution are having a major impact on the morale, the mental health and the productivity of employees of UEA, who have effectively all been made precarious by this announcement. Many staff are currently working on the planning, timetabling, and promotion of next year's courses at this stage of the year, but now do not know whether these courses will even exist by September, nor whether there will be staff to teach on them. Furthermore, the announcements are impacting on the mental health of UEA's student population, towards whom the University has a duty of care.

We urgently call on the University's Executive Team to work in good faith with the campus trade unions, in order to work towards an alternative way out of the crisis that avoids compulsory redundancies, and to rebuild trust with a severely demoralised workforce.

Specifically we ask that you as the Executive Team take the following three steps:

A) **The Executive Team should commit to sharing the University accounts with elected representatives of the campus trade unions at the earliest opportunity**, in order that these can be fully scrutinised by colleagues representing employees' interests. It is not acceptable to exclude elected representatives of our recognised campus unions from any new committee set up to examine the accounts.

B) **The Executive Team should commit to full transparency with regard to their own salaries and the salary cuts they will take.** We believe it is reasonable, at this troubled time, that the Executive Team should commit to ensuring that no individual earns more than £100K per annum at the University for the duration of the crisis period (except where existing contractual arrangements make this impossible, for example in regards to the employment of clinical academics, where a special arrangement exists with the NHS). While we accept that differential pay is an incentive for staff, it is surely both financially untenable and morally unjustifiable - not to mention completely out of line with 'UEA Values' - for members of the Executive Team to earn more than £100K while they plan the redundancies of ordinary staff, many of whom already have significant financial worries. We recognise that the Executive Team will need to follow due process in reducing their salaries and look forward to seeing these salary cuts implemented during the forthcoming financial year.

C) **The Executive Team must engage fully and in good faith with the campus trade unions in developing an entirely new plan to steer us out of this crisis**, inviting union leaders to propose an alternative strategy and allowing this to be voted on at Staff Assembly and Council. As part of this process **we expect the Executive Team to make a firm commitment to a zero-redundancy policy** so that staff are able to plan their lives, and to lobby government for more funding if necessary to avoid redundancies.

We urge the UEA Executive to make a long-term plan that prioritises investment in staff rather than redundancies, low wages and casual contracts. We recognise that this will entail lobbying government to overhaul the current marketised funding model for Higher Education, which has damaged and destabilised the sector in countless ways.

In the immediate term, we call on the ET to lobby other university VCs and government to re-introduce the cap on undergraduate student numbers, the removal of which has had a hugely detrimental effect

on equitable student distribution in HE. When asked directly about this issue at an all-staff forum event in the summer 2022, Professor Richardson declared he was strongly against any reintroduction of student number controls. It is clear that this stance has adversely affected UEA's ability to meet its own recruitment targets and has contributed to the financial position of the university. The removal of the cap on student numbers has enabled Russell Group universities to undertake opportunistic recruitment activity at the expense of other institutions' numbers. While we acknowledge that there are a range of factors in play regarding trends in student recruitment, lobbying government on this single issue alone is likely to help to stabilise student recruitment across HE in the short term.

We believe that what we ask for here is both reasonable and achievable. We hope that you will commit to a zero-redundancy policy and will engage in good faith with the campus trade unions to realise an alternative plan for UEA's future. To summarise, this includes, at a minimum:

A) sharing the accounts with elected representatives of campus trade unions;

B) capping salaries at 100K during the crisis period, except where external obligations require otherwise;

C) committing to a zero-redundancy policy and working with campus trade unions to realise this policy.

Yours sincerely,

The Undersigned.

[1] Figures taken from the University's financial statements, p. 35.

[2] in 2019,, it was estimated that wages had declined by 17% in real terms between 2009 and 2019. . . This has now deteriorated much further.

[3] Figures taken from an email sent in December 2022 to members of UEA Unison trade union.
