

Motion from academic staff on fixed-term contracts from Pathways 2 and 3 regarding the University of Bristol's response to the coronavirus pandemic

Background

On 8 April 2020, 65 employees on fixed-term contracts across Pathways 2 and 3 met online to discuss the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on job security and employment prospects.

This branch recognises:

Due to a wide variety of employment contracts and equally varied lives outside work, the issues that the coronavirus emergency presents to staff on fixed-term contracts vary enormously. They include the following:

- In previous years, a number of fixed-term Pathway 3 staff had their contracts renewed from year to year, so they had a reasonable expectation of renewal this year. However, they now face uncertainty about the coming academic year and the following one because of potential changes in student admissions and the current suspension of recruitment.
- Several Pathway 3 staff on successive fixed-term contracts had been in discussion with senior management in their School/Department about a move to permanent contracts, but they have now been told that their contracts will not be renewed.
- For staff on both pathways whose contracts run out in the next year, it will be difficult to obtain work due to recruitment freezes at the University of Bristol and other universities.
- Staff on both pathways are being asked to take on additional duties.
- Pathway 2 staff will be unable to fulfil responsibilities without an extension because containment measures are impeding research activities. This applies to staff on internal funding as well as those on external funding.
- Staff on both pathways are concerned about their ability to undertake professional duties due to childcare during the emergency period.
- For several Pathway 3 staff who had agreed contract extensions before the pandemic, there is uncertainty about continued employment due to the lack of a follow-up contract from HR.
- For non-UK citizens, visa issues compound the above problems. Some might be legally required to leave the UK at short notice at the end of their contract, even if the borders of the home country in question are still closed.
- Many colleagues are worried that if they are forced to pursue a different career path to keep themselves afloat during the 18 months or so before recruitment recommences, they will find it hard to return to academia.
- The financial sense of dismissing junior staff on short-term contracts as a cost-saving measure is unconvincing, given the relatively low value of the salaries involved when compared with other areas of University spending.
- Information about the logic of decisions has not been readily communicated by senior management.
- All of the above suggests that the institutional response to the coronavirus will have highly detrimental impacts on equality and diversity in the staff body.

In a wider context, problems are very likely to arise when colleagues on permanent and open-ended contracts are asked to go above and beyond their existing workloads to cover the substantial part of academic business that is carried out by fixed-term staff.

Notwithstanding the variety of personal circumstances, this branch recognises that the University's response to the coronavirus pandemic poses an extreme threat to current and future employment security among those it employs on fixed-term contracts. National press coverage of the University of Bristol announcing 84 job cuts due to coronavirus has left many such employees acutely anxious about income security and prospects for work within or beyond the University.

This branch resolves:

- To demand that the University adopts a 'jobs first' response to the current crisis. Securing ongoing employment of existing University staff should be the institutional priority, and the priority of Universities UK (UUK).
- To demand that the University extends the employment of all employees on fixed-term contracts until there is a reasonable opportunity for them to find a replacement job. The University should not leave any employee without a job for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic and any associated recruitment freeze, regardless of when the employee's contract is due to end. This includes renewing the contract of any employee who is due to become unemployed during the pandemic until there is scope to secure further employment. This could include alternative employment within the University.
- To demand that the University provides a detailed costed rationale that supports a blanket extension of PW2 and PW3 contracts, showing how the institution could de-prioritise certain investment and expenditure to secure University of Bristol jobs, as well as protect the current terms and condition of University of Bristol staff.
- To demand that the University adopt the institutional policy of extending the contracts of fixed-term staff where an extension was planned before the institutional response to COVID-19 took effect.
- To demand that the University instructs managers to explore ways of extending employment at the University where the contracts of Pathway 2 and 3 staff are due to end.
- To demand that the University presents a detailed account of why its current recruitment 'hiring freeze' protocol is necessary.
- To demand the University explain what the staff spend saving to the institution will be through its current recruitment policy and why other institutional savings, such as capital spend, have not been considered or ruled out.
- To demand that the University not ask permanent members of staff to cover work ordinarily assigned to casualised colleagues in order to facilitate the loss of the latter's employment.
- To demand that the University: reaffirms its commitment to its Public Sector Equality Duty; provides details on how its decisions on recruitment and contracts during the crisis impact equality of opportunity for protected categories; and ensures that the financial challenges

produced by the crisis do not fall most heavily onto those groups who are already under-represented and -rewarded.

- To consider the University's actioning of the above or its response and propose a branch response and further course of action thereafter.

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