



Dear Professor Brady, Vice Chancellor and President, University of Bristol,

cc: University Management Team (UMT)

Re: Fixed-term Contracts and the University of Bristol's Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Many thanks for [your response to our letter of 3 June 2020 on the recruitment freeze and FTC \(fixed-term contract\) staff \[link\]](#). We welcome a communication that states that “the University is its people,” and that you follow the principle of “putting people at the heart of decision-making”. We also welcome your proposal to continue working in partnership to address the challenges together.

However, the University of Bristol has an opportunity at this precise point in time to demonstrate, as an employer, that it has more than just kind words to offer. It is a matter of fact – as well as choice – that the University has decided to cut its teaching and research capacity by reducing the frontline staff who deliver and support that teaching and research. The University's policy is not to retain fixed-term staff as a matter of course; instead, it transfers risk onto its most vulnerable staff, while maintaining an opaque and uneven process of individual Faculties, Schools and other budget holders bidding for funds to underpin desperately needed contract extensions.

We believe that the University has an unprecedented opportunity to stake a leading position nationally and globally by making financial decisions that allow it to protect its investment in staff and student experience and knowledge, and to draw on those resources in the future. Most importantly, the University could avoid casting off large numbers of junior and precarious staff in ways that will severely impact the inclusivity and diversity of the UK's academic community for a generation.

You state that you will seek to safeguard jobs as far as you are able without putting the future of the institution and its staff and students at risk. We maintain that the University's current policy around the renewals or extensions for fixed-term staff is already putting the diversity and long-term legacy of the University at risk. Avoiding that risk will require exceptional solutions and investment in the short term.

The signatories of the letter of June 3rd and the wider staff body call on the University to demonstrate imagination and courage in seeking those exceptional solutions to maintaining the diversity and wellbeing of its community. We look forward to continuing discussion on how to find and implement these exceptional solutions.

In light of this, we would like to reiterate certain points below.

Non-renewal or extension of fixed-term contracts in the context of a sector-wide recruitment freeze will have a disastrous impact on equality and diversity in the University.

Concerns have been voiced across Higher Education that universities' responses to the coronavirus pandemic disadvantage women, minority ethnicities, and other groups in protected categories. This is evident in the article by Dr Winston Morgan (Guardian, 1/6/20), and statistics on decreasing submissions to journals by women (Guardian, 12/5/20). The signatories of this letter are, like the University's leaders, committed to overcoming structural disadvantages within our sector. We cannot simply accept this loss of diversity as an unfortunate side-effect of the coronavirus pandemic. We need to find positive actions.

We note that the employment of women and ethnic minorities is proportionally more prevalent under fixed-term contracts than in permanent posts, with similar proportions of those who self-identify as LGBT+ or as disabled. The University's chosen policy on renewals/extensions of fixed-term contracts will further reduce the proportion of individuals in these protected categories who are employed by the institution.

We also note that women and ethnic minorities are less likely to "ride out" gaps in employment between contracts, less likely to be able to wait for re-employment, and more likely to be forced to leave the sector entirely.

As a result, the University's current practice is decreasing the inclusivity and diversity of the University as a workplace, the sector as a whole, and contributing to increased gender and ethnic pay gaps.

We repeat our invitation to the University's leaders to acknowledge these realities, and to assure us that they are being considered in all decisions on staffing.

We invite the University to comment on the imaginative ways in which it will seek to retain fixed-term staff during in teaching, research, and in professional services roles. That retention of staff is vital to (i) recent initiatives to increase diversity within the University in the short term, and (ii) career trajectories that offer long-term futures for underrepresented groups in the sector.

You state that "it is the responsibility of the University Executive team, along with the Board of Trustees as custodians of the University, to ensure that that we remain financially viable for generations to come". We suggest that a university that fails to find ways to meet basic principles of social justice and equality is one which offers little value for generations to come. If the University's financial reserves are required to underpin a more inclusive and diverse institution, we would argue that this is an investment that it is necessary to make.

If reductions must be made to expenditure on staff, we urge the University to offer new options that (unlike current policy) do not additionally limit the presence of underrepresented groups in the University, the relative recompense for their labour, and their career trajectories.

Today, right when precarious contracts are having acutely deleterious effects, the University is well placed to stand up and make its voice heard.

We appreciate that the longer-term financial impacts of this crisis are unclear. However, other universities have prioritised spending in the short term to mitigate impacts on staff since the

beginning of lockdown measures in March. The University of Sheffield, King's College London, and the University of Newcastle have all extended contracts for fixed-term staff in various forms. Since those institutions are facing long-term challenges similar to the University of Bristol, within the same external funding structures, we maintain that our University could be doing more, too. This action should not place through the piecemeal issuing of contracts or external recruitment of more precarious workers to research and teaching posts, but by setting out stronger institution-wide measures for protecting and retaining existing staff.

We would welcome a policy offering some cushioning for the University's most vulnerable staff, as well as acknowledging the University's responsibility as an employer that benefits from the use of precarious employment practices (by its own admission).

Now is the time for the University of Bristol to take steps that set the tone for other HEIs, and to demonstrate to funders that the University is committed to creating fairer and more sustainable employment practices. We look forward to hearing how the University will be leading the sector, reframing discussions of cost and value, and influencing funders into better practice, by demonstrating the returns that can be achieved through security and continuity of employment in HEI.

What does the University believe its staff to be worth? More staff will be required to deliver the world-class education that the University aspires to offer in new digital blended-flexible learning environments, and to meet the challenges of the new paradigm for research.

In addition to the opportunity to fulfil a commitment to ethics and public duty, there is a business case for retaining fixed-term staff until at least December 2020. In the context of maintaining a lead in an increasingly competitive global market for digital university education and extraordinary research constraints it makes good ethical and financial sense to invest £27 million to ensure a smooth transition into an unprecedentedly challenging academic year.

Does the University feel confident that it will enter the 2020-21 academic year with the goodwill of a committed staff body if teaching work carried out by hourly-paid and fixed-term staff in 2019-20 is not re-allocated in good time? If the University waits on student numbers before deciding to re-hire for academic and professional service roles in September, having "alleviated" the cost of employing staff through July and August, the University will, we fear, lose enormous amounts of goodwill and time in preparing for the challenge of meeting an entirely novel context in Higher Education.

£27 million amounts to the fees paid by only 1000 home students or 350 international students across three years of undergraduate education. Overstretching existing staff – on open-ended and fixed-term contracts –, or a rush of temporary recruitments to make up capacity in September will result in the University of Bristol's new educational offering being characterised by anxiety and overwork, rather than by imagination and excitement. If the University is not perceived as an institution capable of delivering innovative digital teaching, reputational damage could well last for decades, and generate massive losses in student recruitment, particularly internationally, at a cost much higher than £27 million. With a view to the University as a whole entering confidently into new domains of digital teaching and

research, the assets of continuity and institutional experience provided by retaining hourly-paid and fixed-term staff until the end of TB1 should be well worth £27 million.

We assert that putting people at the heart of decision-making means providing transparency about that decision-making.

There is currently a lack of transparency about decision-making processes. We would like to note our disappointment that your reply to our original letter does not directly address specific questions, e.g. around the University's finances. More than two years of staff unrest over pensions, workload, casualisation, the gender pay gap, and pay have shown that headline figures around deficits and gaps in funding require breaking-down, with the trade-offs of spending decisions clearly set out. Wealthy institutions, such as this University, claim relatively modest staff investment is a liability threatening the University as whole, while asserting that large non-staff capital expenditure is an essential means of future-proofing a University diminished by cuts to teaching and research. The University needs to present a detailed costed rationale that persuades the University body with a careful argument about the grounds for its decision to disinvest in teachers, researchers and professional service staff.

There is currently a lack of transparency about policy implementation. Fixed-term staff do not feel valued by the University. Communication and implementation of the University's recruitment and furlough policy has been contradictory and uneven across conversations with line managers, Departments, Divisions, Schools, and the University. Fixed-term staff require a clear policy so that they feel treated with equity and have the information to consider their short- and medium-term employment options in relation to their financial and professional futures. A lack of transparency is compounding the impact of the current crisis on the emotional and financial security of fixed-term staff. This ongoing anxiety has been made clear in the questions and comments at all-staff webinars over the last three months. The situation might appear to be a matter of "protecting core University business" from one perspective, but many staff perceive a degree of "picking and choosing" without a clear rationale or timetable for decision-making. What can the University do to reverse this opinion of its practice?

Although the crisis has put new and significant pressures on the sector, now is the time to act with initiative and imagination, rather than falling back on employment practices that have been proven to have negative long-term effects. We hope for a response to this letter that addresses our concerns point by point, recognising fixed-term staff as more than a negative budget line or interchangeable units. We would be glad to have a significant material recognition from the University regarding the long-term benefits of the institutional experience, goodwill, and diversity of current fixed-term and hourly-paid staff in terms of the student experience and world-leading research that Bristol aspires to deliver. This includes reframing how staff are valued.

We look forward to a response to this letter in the spirit of "putting people at the heart of decision-making," demonstrating the creative and moral leadership necessary to build the institution that we believe is possible, despite financial adversity. We remain highly motivated

to cooperate with you to deliver exceptional solutions to this exceptional situation. Please email your response to ucu-office@bristol.ac.uk.

Kind regards,

Jamie Melrose, Branch Secretary, University of Bristol UCU, on behalf of Bristol UCU and the Bristol Anti-Precarity Network