

Review of the Contract Extension Scheme and Temporary Recruitment Freeze
Comment paper by Cambridge University and College Union (CUCU) and Unison University
of Cambridge Branch
HR Committee Meeting - 7 July 2020

Background

From 5 PM on 20 March, University staff (excepting those needed for business-critical activity) have been working from home as the University entered its red phase of response to the COVID19 pandemic. The sudden switch to remote working has happened at a time when University staff:

1. has had to cope with the increase of caring responsibilities due to the closure of schools, the impact of the pandemic on the healthcare of dependents, and significant mental health struggles due to the lockdown restrictions¹;
2. had not had the time or resources to adapt their home working environment to the new situation. Especially in case of staff living in flatshares, or living with dependents, the possibility to build an adequate home working environment has been severely hampered or not possible during the pandemic².

On top of these difficulties, casualised members of staff have also had to endure the anxiety provoked by the near total hiring freeze that the HE sector has undergone on a global scale. This means that **those members of staff who will be made redundant in the following months will face unemployment, significant financial hardship and, likely, the decision to exit from the sector.**

Measures taken by the University

Like other HE institutions, the University of Cambridge has also announced a Temporary Recruitment Freeze (TRF) that has halted all recruitment not falling under the exceptions identified in the Temporary Recruitment Protocol. On 6 April 2020, the University Council approved a Contract Extension Scheme (CES) “to support individuals whose employment contracts and assignments ended, or are due to end, between 16 March 2020 and 31 July 2020”. The CES mitigated redundancies 1) by extending employees’ assignments, 2) through the offer of alternative work 3) or through the offer of a payment equivalent to their usual monthly salary, until the end of July. Both from written communication from the VC on 26 May 2020 and from the negotiation meetings with University HR on 10 June, we know that the University estimated that the CES could cost up to £15 million. However, this is a worst-case scenario estimation, and the TU have not been made aware of how much the CES effectively cost. On 16 June 2020, the VC wrote to all University employees stating that the University Council had decided that “the scheme should not continue beyond the end of July. Any further extensions to contractual arrangements will now need to be

¹ According to a survey conducted by CUCU across 119 casualised members of staff in the collegiate university, 1 in 4 respondents have taken on extra caring responsibilities during the pandemic (CUCU, forthcoming).

² According to the same survey, 35% of respondents declared not having all the equipment they need to carry out their duties remotely, or missing specific pieces of equipment. Only 70% of surveyed members declared having a reliable internet connection (CUCU, forthcoming).

considered in line with the recruitment restraint measures that follow from the review of the current recruitment pause”. The VC has also indicated that the Temporary Recruitment Freeze might continue well beyond the end of July.

The process of creation and review of the CES has been carried out without meaningful consultation with CUCU. Although meetings and correspondence with both the VC and University HR have happened on a regular basis in the past three months, CUCU has not been supplied with the protocol used by HR and budget holders across academic divisions to identify staff that could benefit from the CES scheme (excepting the paper approved in Council on 6 April). More strikingly, during the anti-casualisation meeting on 10 June, HR stated that the review of the CES was ongoing and committed to share data regarding the implementation of the scheme once the information became available. CUCU was extremely surprised to hear that the Council voted on the extension of the programme just six days after the aforementioned meeting, and that the University HR still did not make an occasion to openly discuss with the CUCU, Unite and Unison where we would be headed with regards to CES.

Consequences of halting the CES for the University

CUCU finds the decision of Council to halt the CES detrimental to the future of University operations, for two reasons:

1. **Workload:** Halting the CES will produce a significant increase of workload for existing members of staff at the University. This is not only because the work currently undertaken by a larger amount of staff will be redistributed across a smaller number of workers, but also because it is likely that a large proportion of University staff will not be able to operate at full capacity from 31 July onwards, given the persisting restrictions connected to COVID19. The government has announced its intention to bring all children back to school in September. However, it is not clear whether summer camps will reopen before the beginning of the school year, and whether schools will reopen at full capacity (which is not the case for most of the schools that have currently reopened). Furthermore, although the government has indicated a pausing of the shielding scheme from 1 August, [official advice](#) still requires vulnerable categories to exercise extreme cautiousness, and to go to work if 1) one “cannot work from home” and 2) “as long as the business is COVID-safe”. Furthermore, [the current government advice](#) still requires people that get symptoms and their households to self-isolate for fourteen days as soon as they get symptoms. The risk of an increased workload is even more likely if the University decides to extend the TRF. Although the TRF allows to continue hiring staff under a certain number of exceptions, CUCU is worried that the increased paperwork and permissions needed to continue recruitment will discourage budget holders and line managers from insisting on recruiting further resources. It is important to remember that the current level of workload is already considered unmanageable and dangerous for the physical and mental health of University staff³. Furthermore, an

³ According to the [workload survey](#) conducted by UCU national in 2016, “Staff in both HE and FE are working an average of more than two days unpaid every week”, resulting into an “unsustainable” workload.

increase in workload is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities. It is likely, in fact, that an increase in workload will hit female staff especially hard, given the disproportionate amount of care they are doing at the moment. **If the University operations have to run at full capacity, the University will need to rely on additional workforce;**

2. **Reputational damage:** The University risks reputational damage on two grounds. First, by **stretching existing staff resources over unbearable levels of workload, they risk lowering the quality of education that the University will be able to offer to its students in the coming years.** Now more than ever, families and students will be utterly careful about their financial investments in the field of education, and the reputational brand of Cambridge will not shield the University from possible criticism regarding the quality of the education they provide. If the University is committed to offering students the best possible educational experience, they can not achieve this objective through a drastic reduction of its workforce. Second, **the termination of hundreds of University staff members whose contract is coming to an end after the 31 July is likely to come under public scrutiny, especially given the much more stable financial position that the University of Cambridge enjoys compared to most other HE institutions in the UK.**

Recommendations

CUCU recommends the following actions to be considered by the HR Committee:

1. Extend the CES and institutionalise a redeployment mechanism across the the Collegiate University;
2. Reconsider the objective need to renew the TRF in its current form. CUCU would like to reiterate that there is no logical reason to require externally-funded posts to undergo the Temporary Recruitment Protocol;
3. Engage in meaningful consultation with the Trade Unions throughout the ongoing adjustment process re: COVID-19.