

UNISON Higher Education Service Group Branch Seminar

22-24 October 2015, Crowne Plaza, Nottingham

Report by Tracey Holland

Seminar Overview

The seminar was well attended by representatives from Higher Education institutions in England, Wales and Scotland together with Unison Centre Staff and Regional Officers. There were also two observers at the seminar from the Further Education & 6th Form Committee.

The theme of the event was Campaigning and Organising in Higher Education.

Thursday Evening

The event opened on Thursday evening with a round table discussion with Jon Richards (National Secretary UNISON), Sorana Vieru (Vice President NUS), Sally Hunt (UCU) Davena Rankin (STUC Women's Committee) and Denise Ward (Chair UNISON Higher Education Service Group Executive). Areas for discussion included, the [Prevent agenda](#), radical potential changes in BIS, the introduction of the TEF (teaching excellence framework) and the Trade Union bill. The bill was a recurring theme throughout the seminar with several speakers referring to its potential impact on unions both in education and elsewhere. For more information about the bill see the TUC pages [here](#). In essence, the bill proposes that there will be changes to the threshold needed to call industrial action, restrictions on picketing, informing employers about the use of social media by unions, re-balloting requirements every 3 months and the ability of employers to use casual staff to cover the work of striking employees. If the bill was to go through this would represent a fundamental change in the industrial landscape. Whilst the government is claiming that the bill is aiming to "modernise" industrial relations and the unions, there is still no provision being made to allow unions to vote on-line for example.

Sorana Vieru from the NUS spoke about the 3 big things that the budget contained relating to students and these are areas that the NUS is concentrating on:

1. "Cut the costs" campaign - to fight against the proposal to change grants (currently awarded to the most disadvantaged students) to loans;
2. Freezing the loan repayment threshold, both in the future and retrospectively meaning more students will begin to pay back loans at effectively lower wages;
3. TEF - and a potential raise in tuition fees.

The picture in Scotland seems to be brighter than in England with free education for all, although this doesn't prevent some University Principles from pushing the boundaries which could provide challenges in future.

The evening ended with a dinner and a quiz (won by the team containing yours truly - nothing to do with me I just sat with really brainy people!)

Friday

Friday's session opened with an item around campaigning about the TU bill.

There then followed a roundtable discussion about organising and recruiting with some branches sharing best practice. There were suggestions for things that we, in Sheffield Hallam, already do - organising drop in and lunch sessions, newsletters, campaign stands for recruitment, health and wellbeing campaigns (like reclaim your lunch). Some ideas that we may find useful were rotate where we hold the branch committee meetings and invite members to drop in for coffee / cake before or after the meeting, meeting with members who resign to find out why, use of social media, lunch & learn events where non-members can attend if no cost, surveys & questionnaires, use of H&S inspections to talk to members.

There were 2 workshop sessions on Friday and I attended Effective Campaigning & Identifying Legal Cases. The first session was a little different to what I'd anticipated and focussed entirely on role playing how to lobby your MP to vote against the TU bill. This was a useful exercise but not something I would have signed up for - I really wanted to get some ideas about running campaigns locally and getting support for national campaigns. The second session was given by Thompsons and was a useful basic guide to employment law - an area I'm not familiar with so proved very informative for me.

Max Watson (formally of London Met) was there representing Hope not Hate and spoke of their [campaign to encourage voter registration](#).

Friday finished with a talk from Ian Draper from the [Stress Network](#). He gave some useful information about managing stress and referred us to the HSE work related stress tools and templates (found [here](#)). I collected some booklets about work stress and can give these out if anyone is interested in finding out more.

Saturday morning

Saturday started with a session on the HE Pay 2016/17 award. The motion is attached. The deadline for motions is 12noon on 5/11, preliminary motions due by 6/12 and any amendments by 31/12.

Rory Shannon gave a presentation about LGBT in higher education and shared the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual map of world laws produced by ILGA (found [here](#)). This was an eye opening depiction of countries and areas of the world where LGBT people can find themselves in very real danger. Rory encouraged us to ensure that any staff visiting these areas are supported and risk assessments are carried out.

Saturday's session ended with an appeal from Mairin Power (Assistant National Officer, UNISON) raising the awareness about workers' rights (or rather lack of rights) in relation to the World Cup 2022 and the World Athletics Championships 2019 in Qatar. Migrant workers have few rights and are treated no better than slaves, with women being particularly disadvantaged. 2000 migrant workers have already been killed. The ITUC is running a campaign (Re-run the vote: no world cup without worker's rights - [here](#)), many international and global companies are going after contracts worth up to £40bn, it's not about boycotting these companies but about reminding them of their human rights responsibilities.