

Mr. Kevin Conroy  
The Centre Director  
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Tuesday 9 February 2021

Dear Kevin

### **The concerns of UCU members**

You may be aware that we recently conducted a survey of our members. We followed this up with a members' meeting to clarify concerns and discuss what to do. This letter is the outcome.

### **Furlough**

This generated a considerable number of queries and concerns.

One issue was financial. Unlike Newcastle University (a neighbouring institution and partner) and other comparable organizations, INTO decided not to top up salaries while staff were on furlough leave. This led to a financial detriment and a degree of resentment.

However, the biggest concerns with the scheme have been around:

- a. poor communication;
- b. a lack of transparency;
- c. the apparent inequity in its application;

The following responses were fairly typical:

*"It was poorly handled, leaving us feeling isolated...we were asked not to talk to colleagues...we were not given an explanation why we were chosen over others."*

*"It came as a real shock and it was not what I wanted at all...I felt isolated and had a reduced sense of self-worth...One issue was not knowing who else was in the same position."*

*"It came as a surprise and it is not clear how staff were chosen."*

Members felt that there was no clear process for choosing who was to be placed on furlough leave. This lack of transparency is of concern to all staff. Collaboration across teams is more difficult when there is uncertainty about who is at work and who is on furlough leave. Since the survey, a number of members have contacted the union expressing concern about when they are to be brought back into the organization. This is causing some anxiety.

## **Working from Home**

A number of our members commented on the costs of working from home. Respondents gave examples of the expense of doing their own printing, including purchasing hardware, ink, and paper. Others commented about basics such as "proper" (supportive) office chairs, an appropriate desk and foot rests. One respondent made the suggestion that "*They should've done an audit to see who needs what.*"

In terms of the support and contact received, members generally reported that they had felt: well supported by their colleagues; less so by line management; and un-supported by INTO Senior Leadership. There was no clarity about what comprised "*INTO Senior Leadership*". A number said that while there was some shared and mutual understanding of what we were all facing at the start of the pandemic, it had now largely disappeared.

## **Communication with staff**

As well as concerns about the communication regarding furlough, the general issue of "*Poor communication*" was mentioned throughout the responses.

There was, however, a different view towards how line managers had been supportive compared to how general senior management at INTO had been, but please note the proviso already mentioned above regarding what is meant by "*INTO Senior Leadership*".

When asked what could be done to improve things at INTO, every respondent included "*Improve communications*" (or similar wording) in their top three.

## **Suggestions**

Our survey asked "*Please state three things that INTO could do to help you at this time.*" Here is our summary:

- Suggestions were made about reimbursement for purchases as a consequence of home-working.
- Improving communication (including the provision of information about INTO) was stated by every respondent, as mentioned above.
- Tackling workload and assessing how work is allocated was also mentioned in a number of responses.
- Investment in resources (including training) for the future. "*More training on online teaching platforms and Hyflex*" summed up the concerns expressed by many.

How these might be addressed is something that could form the basis of a discussion. However, as a first step – and with particular regard to the first bullet point – our suggestion is that communication on this issue is done sensitively, but proactively, with a view to compensating staff as best as possible.

**Next Steps**

While UCU does not have any formal mechanism for raising concerns and seeking to resolve them collectively, we would, of course, be willing to meet and talk through the contents of this letter.

However, regardless of whether we meet, the concerns expressed to us are genuine. We believe that they need to be addressed. In the spirit of openness, we are making our members aware of the contents of this letter. Likewise, we would like to do the same with any response.

One final point. Since we conducted our survey and met with members, I have been made aware of correspondence from Chris Heady to staff on furlough leave. While this is a welcome step, it does not address previous failings and concerns. Staff still need to know where they stand in the future.

If you would like to discuss any of these matters, please do get in touch.

Kind regards,

*Jon Bryan*

**Jon Bryan**  
**Regional Support Official**