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UK universities 'systematically underpaying staff for years'

Sector leaders acknowledge long-term problems with pay and say now is the time to resolve them after union promises strikes

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UK universities have been “systematically underpaying” staff for “many years” as the sector had struggled to remain solvent with an ever-swelling student body paying fixed fees, according to two leading vice-chancellors.

Michael Spence, president of UCL, told *Times Higher Education's* THE Campus Live event that staff had suffered as a result of the UK's massification. “We've balanced the books by hugely increasing numbers of international students, by, in many institutions, not investing in adequate repairs and maintenance and, as a system, systematically underpaying our staff,” he said.

Dr Spence, who was until 2020 vice-chancellor of the University of Sydney, said UK pay stood in stark contrast to Australia – a major problem in globally competitive recruitment. “The person in my office who greeted people, opened the mail and made cups of coffee earned more than some senior academics at UCL,” he said.

Recruiting at current pay levels, particularly for staff at grades six to nine, was “not sustainable”, he said, adding that while UK universities had got good at scoring high-flying top staff, those in the middle had not been well looked after.

“We've been underpaying our staff for many, many years, and our staff really are angry now,” agreed Pamela Gillies, principal of [Glasgow Caledonian University](https://www.glasgow.ac.uk/). Her comments came as members of the University and College Union [voted to strike for three days at the end of November](#) in a long-running dispute that includes pay.

“Colleagues, I really think now's the time we have to address this underpayment issue seriously, and I'm all for collective bargaining because that will protect the diversity of institutions we have in our sector,” she told the audience.

In July, when universities and unions sat down to discuss pay, they were [unable to agree](#) going above a 3 per cent rise for most staff. Charles Egbu, vice-chancellor of [Leeds Trinity University](#), said it was important to remember that UK universities were “heterogenous” and that some would struggle to go above that threshold. “When it comes to the notion of moving beyond 3 per cent or 4 per cent, it’s going to be challenging for a university like mine.”

While finances vary, all institutions are facing a bleaker economic and public funding outlook together. Karen Cox, vice-chancellor of the [University of Kent](#), said the uncertainty created by increasing inflation and geopolitical tensions made for the “one of the most challenging financial environments” for UK universities.

“The sector is in a situation it’s probably not faced for a long time, and I think that we’re going to have to make some really difficult decisions about what we do, how we do it, where we invest, and what the future looks like,” she said.

Professor Gillies said it was “shocking” that universities in Scotland had been told to prepare for 5 per cent to 10 per cent cuts in their budgets. Despite the bleak outlook, she said that teaching had improved since the pandemic and that it was time for investment in training people to match the money pumped into acquiring technology.

“There will need to be a lot more investment in the human side of these new learning opportunities than we’ve actually had the time or the space to invest in because of Covid,” she said. “Our staff are our jewels in the crown, and we need to properly reward them.”

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