

Down tools, everybody out!

I'm 45 and yesterday, for the first time in my life I stood on a picket line as part of the strike action by university staff happening at the moment.

I have to be honest, it doesn't sit easily with me, I feel very uncomfortable not being available to my colleagues as I know the impact on front line staff when things aren't running smoothly, but that is exactly why I felt I had to join the strike. And those same frontline staff are the ones bringing tea and coffee to those on the picket line. That's how awesome they are.

Now I am not a lecturer, and I wanted to write this blog post to make the non-lecturer staff involved in this dispute more visible because I think for anyone wondering what's going on and why, having a proper, rounded view university life will actually be beneficial.

Firstly, what is the strike about

Well, the two big issues you will hear mentioned are, changes to the pension scheme, and pay and working conditions. Now, this is a simplistic view, obviously, individual people will have other issues they feel have led to their actions, but essentially this is what the campaign is about.

I'm not going to go heavily into the politics here but you can find out more from the University and Colleges Union site:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/heaction>

So why am I writing this blog then, if I'm not going to explain the reason staff are striking? Well mostly, I wanted to talk about my experience and feelings as a non-lecturer and how I see the issues affecting my colleagues and because I think information in context is always a powerful thing. And in this context, actually, all staff are affected by these concerns.

The very visible part of education is obviously that students sit in the classroom (physical or virtual) and learn. Hence why most of the attention around this strike has been on lost lessons and students either supporting or being angry at lost teaching time. However, the university is a massive machine, full of intricate working, gears, cogs etc (my lack of mechanical knowledge is showing here). So before, during and after the moment that student sits in a class and learn, there are any number of staff working to make that happen. From administration professionals, cleaning crews, facilities, IT, learning technology, technicians. I could keep going on for quite a while, but you get my point. There are so many cogs that are involved in keeping higher education running and ensuring the end product of teaching and research happens.

So as you can see, the skills and knowledge of all these different members of staff is essential. To get the best from them, to properly use those skills and access that knowledge requires a workforce who are happy, feel secure, feel that what they do is worthwhile, and most importantly, want to be there.

So when I stand on the picket line this week and part of next,

its because I want my colleagues to feel safe, secure, worthwhile, appreciated, all of those things we all want. And unfortunately, watching an endless stream of temporary staff who have no job security, a constant turnover of staff needing trained and supported only to start again almost immediately as they are replaced by the next batch, seeing colleagues working 4 and 5 hours overtime a day unpaid and obviously seeing colleagues decide if they can actually afford to pay into a pension, something essential, is absolutely demoralising.

Unfortunately, this is the reality behind the friendly, ever-smiling faces staff wear in order to create a safe, clean, supported learning environment.

I haven't even touched on the personal impact I see as a learning technologist. The fact that my role is to support, encourage and train staff to use the digital teaching tools available, including online learning. If you've read my [about me page](#), you know how passionate I am about digital teaching tools and the huge impact they made on my life. So you can imagine how heartbreaking it is for me to experience staff who are scared that these tools will actually make their jobs harder, worse, meaningless, or even replace them completely. This week, staff are worried that lecture recording technology will be used to circumnavigate the strike, so essentially drain them of any worth.

This is all comes down to staff feeling secure, happy and worthwhile. All staff.

I hate to say it, but I know this is getting thrown around so let me put it into my perspective. If higher education is

genuinely being commodified, then that goes both ways. If you want the skills the staff have, you have to pay a fair price for them.

Oh, on a side note... I am also a part-time student, my supervisor is on strike, meaning I'm going to be a few weeks behind in my work to get my dissertation submitted. Yes, it's frustrating, but you know what? My supervisor has been absolutely invaluable to me, so I want to make sure they are still there, offering the same level of support to the next student after me, and the one after that.

Thank you to my awesome colleagues yesterday who were good sports, posing for pictures.