Higher Education. It's ours

Building membership

UCU
University and College Union

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Building membership

Education. It's ours is our campaign to protect the future of higher education.

The campaign is about building a different future: one where education is properly funded, staff are secure and valued, students can access education without being pushed into greater debt, and universities are accountable to the people they exist to serve.

Winning that future requires a strong union, with high density.

That means recruiting many more colleagues who are not yet members, strengthening our branches, developing new activists and building the relationships we need to campaign effectively in our workplaces and communities.

You don't need to be an experienced organiser. It's about what each of us can bring.

You don't need to have all the answers.

You do need to be willing to talk to colleagues, listen to what matters to them, be dedicated to building a union that reflects this, and crucially, be willing to ask them to join.

A simple approach

1. Talk to people.

2. Listen.

3. Connect their concerns to collective action.

4. Ask them to join.

5. Give them something to do.

6. Follow up.

And keep doing this. It's a circular exercise.

Our commitment to you

As part of building power in the workplace, UCU will be producing a new set of recruitment materials to support your work on the ground. Some of these are already available on our campaign website.

We will be launching a new support and communications package for UCU representatives including practical resources like UCU rep lanyards and QR code join UCU badges to increase visibility in the workplace.

These resources will gradually be shared with branches in the coming weeks.

Why recruitment matters

A strong union starts with people.

The more colleagues who are organised in UCU, the greater our ability to understand what is happening across our workplaces, represent staff collectively, campaign effectively and develop the workplace leaders we need.

Recruitment is therefore not something separate from organising.

Recruitment is organising.

Every new member strengthens our collective voice.

Every conversation with a colleague also helps us understand our workplace: what people care about, where problems are developing, who people listen to and where we need to build organisation.

And every new member could become the next workplace contact, activist or rep.

And a new perspective is just as important and welcome as that of a long-standing activist. **New members often see what those of us who have been round a while cannot – inexperience can actually be very valuable!**

Education. It's ours

The campaign gives us a reason to start conversations.

Across higher education, colleagues are experiencing the consequences of a system under sustained pressure.

Talk to colleagues about what they are seeing and experiencing.

What is happening to their workload?

What is happening to their job security?

What is happening to their students?

What do they think is happening to their institution?

What would they change?

The campaign provides a way to connect those conversations to collective action.

UCU is campaigning for:

- Sustainable investment in higher education.
- Protection for jobs, pay and pensions.
- A transformed long-term funding model.
- A fairer approach to international staff and students.
- Stronger governance of the sector.

The campaign is also about building the organisation capable of achieving these goals.

The stronger we are, the more we can do together.

The more of us there is, the more we can demand and win.

Recruitment conversations

You don't need a script.

But having a simple structure can make conversations easier.

Introduce

Start naturally.

"Hi, I'm [name]. I'm a UCU member and I'm talking to colleagues about what is happening in higher education and our *Education. It's ours* campaign. Have you got a couple of minutes?"

If you already know the person, start with the conversation you would normally have.

The important thing is to explain who you are and why you are talking to them.

Identify issues

Ask open questions.

"How are things going in your area?"

"What do you think is the biggest issue facing staff here?"

"If you could change one thing about working here, what would it be?"

"How are changes here affecting your students?"

Then ***listen***.

The conversation is about them, not you.

Find out what matters to the person in front of you.

Understand their concerns and reservations.

Connect

Connect what they have told you to collective action.

"That's something we've been talking about in UCU too."

"That's one of the reasons it matters whether staff are organised."

"UCU is campaigning on some of those issues through *Education. It's ours*."

Don't give someone every campaign message. Use the message that connects to what they have told you.

Call the question

This is the part that people often avoid.

Ask directly:

"Would you like to join UCU?"

Then stop talking.

Give them time to answer.

If they are interested, help them join.

If they are unsure:

"What's holding you back?"

Listen to the answer.

Inoculate

People may have concerns about joining. They may even have previously been a member and left.

They may wonder about cost, time, representation or what membership involves.

Or perhaps they disagree with previous decisions the union has made.

Don't dismiss their concerns.
Ask questions.

"What particularly worries you about joining?"

Answer honestly.

If you don't know something, say so and find out.

Action

Joining is the beginning, not the end.

Give every new member a next step.

Invite them to:

- Meet their rep.
- Attend a branch meeting.
- Come to an *Education. It's ours* event.
- Help with a campaign activity.
- Talk to another colleague.
- Join the local organising group.

Ask:

"What would you be interested in helping with?"

The conversation at a glance

INTRODUCE
Who are you and why are you talking?
↓
IDENTIFY ISSUES
What matters to them?
↓
CONNECT
How does collective action relate to those concerns?
↓
CALL THE QUESTION
Will they join?
↓
INOCULATE
What concerns or questions do they have?
↓
ACTION
What will they do next?

Listen first

Recruitment works best when it is a conversation rather than a sales pitch. Avoid giving someone a long speech before finding out what they think.

Avoid jargon.

Avoid assuming you already know what matters to them.

Avoid trying to win every disagreement.

Instead:

- Ask.
- Listen.
- Understand.
- Connect.
- Ask.

A good recruitment conversation should leave you knowing more about your colleague and your workplace than you did before.

Questions that open conversations

About work

- What is it like working here at the moment?
- What is the biggest pressure on staff?
- What would you change if you could?
- What do you think is changing in your area?

About students

- How are current changes affecting students?
- What concerns you most about the student experience?
- Are students getting the education and support they deserve?

About the future

- What do you think higher education should look like?
- What would you protect?
- What would you change?

About collective action

- Do you think staff can change this together?
- What would make more colleagues get involved?
- Who else should we be talking to?

Common questions

"Why should I join?"
Start with what they have told you.

"You said workload is one of your biggest concerns. One reason people join UCU is so that they can work collectively with colleagues on issues like that."

Then explain the relevant benefits of membership accurately.

Ask: "Would you be willing to join and help strengthen that collective voice?"

"I get the benefits anyway."
You can acknowledge that collective action can improve things for everyone.

Then explain that the union's ability to negotiate, represent staff and campaign depends on people choosing to organise together.

"If this issue matters to you, would you be willing to join?"

"I don't have time."
Joining doesn't mean becoming a rep or attending every meeting.

"You don't have to take on a big role. Joining is a first step, and you can decide how much you want to get involved."

Offer one small action.

"It's too expensive."
Point out that subscription rates are progressive. Members that earn less pay less to join.

Ask if they're aware that they can claim tax relief on union subscriptions?

"I'm not interested in politics."
Bring the conversation back to their workplace.

"That's fine. What is the biggest issue affecting you at work?"

"I don't think unions change anything."
Don't immediately argue.

Ask: "What makes you feel that way?"

Listen.

Then use a relevant example from your workplace or sector.

Be honest about what has and hasn't been achieved.

"I'm already in another union."
Ask: "Which union are you in?"

"What made you join?"

Find out what representation they currently have and explain UCU's role accurately where relevant.

Ask if they're aware of UCU's dual membership schemes.

Don't disparage another union.

"I need to think about it."
Respect that.

Ask: "Of course. What would you like to think about?"

Agree when you will follow up.

Don't leave a promising conversation without a next step.

Recruitment is everyone's job

You don't have to be a branch officer to recruit.

Start small.

Me + 1

Ask every member:

"Who is one colleague you could talk to about joining UCU?"

Then make the ask.

Once that becomes routine, build from there.

Me + 5

Ask members to have five recruitment conversations.

Me + 10

Give volunteers a list of ten colleagues to contact and support them to have the conversations.

The number matters less than the principle.

Build a culture where recruitment is a normal part of being active in UCU.

Know your workplace

You cannot organise people you don't know.

Use the campaign work to understand your workplace.

Map:

- Departments and faculties.
- Professional services.
- Teaching teams.
- Research teams.
- Hourly-paid and casual staff.
- Postgraduate researchers.
- Early-career staff.
- Fixed-term staff.
- Campuses and satellite sites.
- Areas with high and low membership.
- Areas with strong and weak organisation.

Then ask:

Where are we strong?

Where are we weak?

Who isn't a member?

Who talks to everyone?

Who do colleagues go to for advice?

Who could become an organiser?

Don't only look for people with formal positions.

Some of the most important people in a workplace are those colleagues naturally trust and listen to. We call them 'organic leaders' and spotting them is really important. As is recruiting them into the union and enlisting them on our campaigns.

Build the organising group

Recruitment becomes more powerful when people work together.

Bring together:

- Branch officers.
- Reps.
- Ordinary members.
- New members.
- Colleagues from different departments.
- Academic staff.
- Professional services staff.
- Researchers and early-career staff.
- People with strong community connections.
- People who enjoy talking to colleagues.
- People who can organise events and activities.
- People who can communicate online.

Chart our connections

Workers are not just employees.

We are also part of families, communities, clubs, organisations and networks.

The Education. It's ours handbook sets out whole-worker charting as a way of understanding those relationships.

Ask members:

Who do you know?

Friends
Family
Local schools
Faith groups and places of worship
Sports teams
Other unions
Activist groups
Political parties
Hobby groups
Local businesses
Resident or neighbourhood groups
Community organisations

These relationships can help us understand our communities, find allies and connect higher education to the wider public.

From recruitment to organisation

A new member shouldn't disappear into the membership database.

Welcome

Make contact.

Introduce them to their branch.

Tell them who their rep is.

Ask what brought them to UCU.

Involve

Invite them to an activity or social event.

Give them something achievable to do.

Ask what they are interested in.

Develop

Find out what they are good at.

Find out who they know.

Find out what issues matter to them.

Offer opportunities to learn and organise.

Lead

Support members who want to take on more responsibility.

Help them recruit colleagues.

Help them organise conversations.

Help them become workplace leaders.

Recruit through campaign activity

Every campaign activity can also be a recruitment opportunity.

Campaign stalls

Bring:

- Campaign materials.
- Joining information.
- A QR code to join.
- A sign-up mechanism.
- Details of upcoming events.
- People ready to have conversations.

Don't just hand out leaflets.

Talk to people.

Department visits

Go in pairs.

Visit colleagues where they work.

Ask about the issues affecting them.

Follow up afterwards.

New-starter welcome

Make UCU part of the welcome for every new colleague.

Give them:

- A welcome.
- An introduction to UCU.
- Their local rep's details.
- Joining information.
- An invitation to get involved.

Open campaign meetings

Invite members and non-members.

Make the meeting relevant to an issue people care about.

Give everyone a way to participate.

End with a clear ask.

Join UCU.
or
Bring a colleague next time.
or
Help organise the next activity.

A month of recruitment

Start with mapping

Identify colleagues who are not yet members.

Identify members who could recruit.

Identify people who could help organise.

Have conversations

Make time for one-to-one conversations.

Don't try to do everything at once.

Ten good conversations are more useful than a hundred leaflets nobody discusses.

Make the ask

Ask people to join.

Ask existing members to recruit.

Ask new members to take a first action.

Follow up

Welcome new members.

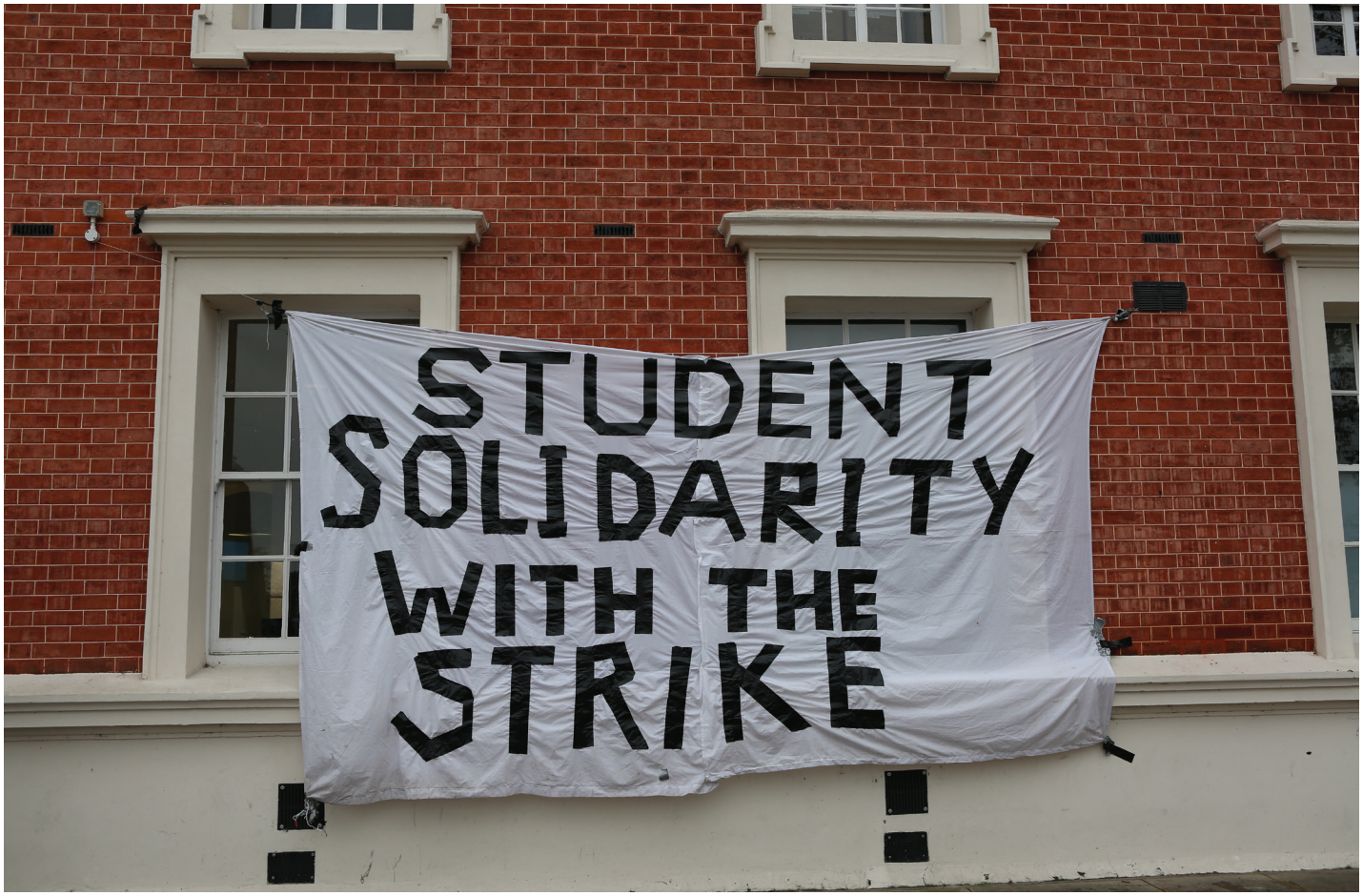
Return to people who wanted time to think.

Ask what you learned.

Identify new organisers.

Then do it again.

UCU
OFFICIAL
PICKET
SOAS
College Buildings


STUDENT
SOLIDARITY
WITH THE
STRIKE

Recruitment checklist

Before

- ☐ Know which part of the workplace you are organising.
- ☐ Identify potential recruits.
- ☐ Identify members who can help.
- ☐ Have joining information ready.
- ☐ Have campaign materials available.
- ☐ Make sure volunteers know the conversation structure.
- ☐ Agree who will follow up.

During

- ☐ Introduce yourself.
- ☐ Ask questions.
- ☐ Listen.
- ☐ Identify what matters to the colleague.
- ☐ Connect their concerns to collective action.
- ☐ Ask them to join.
- ☐ Answer questions honestly.
- ☐ Agree a next step.

After

- ☐ Follow up.
- ☐ Welcome new members.
- ☐ Invite them into branch activity.
- ☐ Ask new members who else they could talk to.
- ☐ Identify potential organisers.
- ☐ Review what you have learned.

Five things to remember

1. Ask

People cannot join if nobody asks them.

2. Listen

The conversation starts with the colleague.

3. Be honest

You don't need to pretend the union has every answer.

4. Make it easy

Have joining information ready.

5. Follow up

Recruitment is a relationship, not a transaction.

Start the conversation

If you're nervous, start here:

"Hi, I'm [name]. I'm a UCU member. I'm talking to colleagues about what is happening in higher education and what we can do collectively. Can I ask what you think is the biggest issue affecting staff here at the moment?"

Then listen.

When they've finished:

"That's really interesting. UCU is organising around some of those issues through *Education. It's ours*. Would you be interested in joining us?"

You don't need a perfect speech. You just need to start the conversation.

Contact

Education. It's ours

Build the union. Protect our education.

UCU – University and College Union
educationitsours.org.uk

For campaign support:
campaigns@ucu.org.uk

For support with lobbying MPs or coordinating meetings with MPs:
politics@ucu.org.uk

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