

In this Newsletter

1. UCU Fighting Fund
2. FE and HE in the Covid-19 Crisis
3. The Future of the Triple Lock
4. Trade and the USA
5. Covid-19 and Widening Inequality
6. The Financial Crisis of Care Homes
7. Me, SAGE and the Covid-19 Pandemic
8. Climate Change in a time of Pandemic
9. UCU Retired Members Branch



More information and news

can be obtained from these websites. We suggest you have a browse.

UCU National Website:

<http://www.ucu.org.uk>

AgeUK: <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/>

68 is too late: www.68istoolate.org.uk

National Pensioners Convention (NPC):

<http://npcuk.org>

Your branch has its own website at

<http://www.ucu-em-rmb.org.uk>

Follow your Branch on Twitter:

@ucu-em-rmb

UCU Fighting Fund

Following the USS and many other industrial disputes in recent years, the UCU Fighting Fund is more important than ever.

It has been heavily used and has enabled many members to take part who otherwise might not have been able.

One way in which retired members can assist is through donating to the fund. We appreciate that this is not possible for everyone but for those who are able it is a good way to provide practical support.

There are more details in the following article or by visiting www.ucu.org.uk/fightingfund

There are currently no scheduled Branch Meetings.



1. Donate to the UCU Fighting Fund

Following the USS and many other industrial disputes in recent years, the UCU Fighting Fund is more important than ever. It has been heavily used and has enabled many members to take part who otherwise might not have been able. One way in which retired members can assist is through donating to the fund. We appreciate that this is not possible for everyone but for those who are able it is a good way to provide practical support.

UCU congress has recognised the current economic situation means it likely there will be a number of disputes to save jobs and services and protect conditions. This has been exacerbated by the many disputes that are arising as a reaction to some institutional responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Congress has recommended that members who can afford to do so should make an annual donation to the fighting fund to support others.

Congress suggested that an appropriate donation would be £25, depending upon members' circumstances, but any donation to support colleagues in struggle is greatly appreciated and will be used directly to help members on strike.

How to donate:

- Securely online by credit card via the PayPal website
- Make a direct bank transfer, or set up a regular standing order, to:
Account name: UCU Fighting Fund
Sort code: 60-83-01
Account no: 20179432
Reference: 'Fighting Fund Voluntary Levy'
- or send a cheque (payable to 'University and College Union') to:
Fighting Fund donation
Finance Dept
University and College Union
Carlow Street
London
NW1 7LH

Rob Kirkwood

2. FE and HE in the Covid-19 Crisis

Uncertainty and crisis are familiar concepts to those working in the FE and HE sectors but the impact of Covid-19 is fomenting unprecedented challenges. Lockdown has produced its own difficulties of course, and at the time of writing UCU is engaged in various arm wrestles with college

principals over re-opening of their facilities. The most immediate response to lockdown has been the hard work by skilled and dedicated educators to utilise on-line technologies to enable as much learning as possible to continue. However, on-line and blended learning options can only ever go so far and carry with them a host of problems and issues, not the least of which is the very real danger that employers might use these methods as a springboard for cutting costs and staff. There are issues for learners as well of course, such as accessibility and equality considerations. Whilst UCU is pleased to report that one of the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis has been increased engagement by employers with the union it is also apparent that some, such as Coventry College and Portsmouth University are seeing this as an opportunity to press ahead with cuts and redundancy programmes. Current government guidance on re-opening essentially leaves UCU in a position of needing to negotiate with their individual employers about safe working, with mixed responses.

Alongside teaching unions across the whole education sector, UCU has published a set of five key tests before a safe return to face to face teaching can be considered.

1: Much lower numbers of Covid-19 cases. The new case count must be much lower than it is now, with a sustained downward trend and confidence that new cases are known and counted promptly.

2: A national plan for social distancing. The government must have a national plan in place which includes parameters for both appropriate physical distancing and safe levels of social mixing in all further education settings.

3: Comprehensive testing. Comprehensive access to regular testing for students and staff, with isolation for all suspected cases, to ensure colleges don't become hotspots for Covid-19.

4: A whole college strategy for health and safety risk assessments and safe ways of working for all tasks and spaces within a college should be established with relevant staff and unions in advance.

5: Protection for the Vulnerable Plans must specifically address the protection of all staff, students and members of their households who are vulnerable to Covid-19.

At the time of writing it seems fair to say that none of these conditions can be regarded as having been fully met. Indeed, many FE Colleges locally and

across the country have declared that they will not open until September 9th. The complexities and expense of producing in each college setting the myriad of bespoke, properly risk-assessed, practicable arrangements required for safe face-to-face working are really quite boggling, so the hesitation of these colleges provides the minor comfort that at least on this issue there may even be some unusually healthy levels of agreement emerging between UCU and college managers up and down the country. This, though, is against a backdrop of an unprecedented crisis that threatens the very existence of the post-16 sector. (For example, see below for a report into the situation at Nottingham College).

It is in this context that UCU has launched its **Fund the Future** campaign. Recent governmental announcements of support packages for education have been short term and focussed almost entirely on the school sector. This is despite an alarming report back in April from London Economics (https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10871/LE_report_on_covid19_and_university_finances/pdf/LEreportoncovid19anduniversityfinance) which warned that universities face a £2.5bn funding black hole due to lost income from student tuition fees and teaching grants. The report warned that, without government intervention, the country faced a total shortfall of £6bn from the reduced economic activity generated by universities with 60,000 jobs at risk. The report suggests the sector itself could lose 30,000 jobs as income from new domestic enrolments, overseas students and other income generating activities are all squeezed, and this is without factoring in the potential impact of what is increasingly looking like a messy Brexit.

Worryingly, the government's only response to date has been to allow a temporary uplift of recruitment of up to 5% in UK and EU domiciled students, but with some universities more exposed to a collapse in overseas numbers it is not difficult to see that this can only result in an unsightly scrap to recruit from a reduced market of domestic students – an unseemly scrap that can therefore only produce losers for every winner.

The Association of Colleges' 2020 Covid-19 survey (<https://www.aoc.co.uk/news/colleges-will-lose-%C2%A3150-million-term-alone-aoc-research-reveals>) estimates that colleges stand to lose £150 million by the next academic year due to the pandemic. With over £2 billion of college income uncertain for next academic year, colleges are worried that they will lack the resources and capacity to support the increase in students they are expecting. Of particular concern is the potential collapse in apprenticeships and the

disproportionate impact on learners with additional needs. The AoC research also 'shows that it will be vulnerable and SEND students and those from disadvantaged groups that could be hit hardest by constraints on colleges...' these students are most likely to disengage but they are also the groups that generally require more support. There is a real danger that without a sustainable long-term plan, colleges will lack the resources and these students who deserve high-quality education more than ever, may not be able to reach their potential'. More holistically, the concern is that the FE sector may find itself in the position of lacking the capacity for delivering the training and retraining required to re-build the post-Covid economy.

As UCU General Secretary Jo Grady succinctly put it: 'We now desperately need a clear and coherent plan from the government that guarantees funding and jobs to protect our academic capacity. The country cannot afford to push tens of thousands of teachers, researchers, and education professionals into unemployment at a time when we will need education to be a key driver of recovery.'



'Our "Fund the Future" campaign will demonstrate the importance of education and make the case for investment in our colleges and universities to politicians across the political divide. We have to ensure that education is given the support it needs to lead our recovery from this crisis.'

(<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10831/UCU-launches-Fund-the-Future-campaign-to-secure-universities-and-colleges>)

Paul Wilkinson

The local FE situation – Nottingham College.

Like many FE Colleges, Nottingham College is approaching the easing of lockdown with some caution. However in response to the government's policy that year 12 students should have some face to face teaching before the end of the Summer term, the High Pavement Sixth Form centre at Nottingham College has for the last two weeks invited year 12 A level students into college for some UCAS registration and personal statement sessions. This is alongside the online subject

teaching which has been taking place throughout lockdown. Staff volunteered to do these sessions and senior curriculum management have been clear that staff should not be pressured to do this if they felt unwilling to take any risks, because of the need to use public transport, are themselves vulnerable or live with others who are.

The sessions have involved about 6-8 students in a classroom at any one time with a teacher and an "Achievement" coach. All sessions were by appointment and students had to sign in at reception, where they were issued with their own pencil! This began on the 15th June for two weeks only, each student attending one two hour session per week. The take up rate from students has been running at about 60% from those invited. Reports from the first week suggest staff and students were nervous, but less so by the second week. Only a limited part of the building was open and staff were unable to access their own staff workrooms. Each staff volunteer took three sessions per week, a one-way system was in operation with students leaving the building by the back door.

UCU branch officers undertook thorough health and safety risk assessments at High Pavement and elsewhere in the college before commencement, although it is unclear what teaching has taken place on other sites; it is reported that some Art and Design, Motor Vehicle and BTEC students have had to attend for some practical sessions/assessments. One member described this approach as being back at work, but not being back! It was also suggested that this was a tick box response to Government's contradictory and piecemeal advice and therefore of limited value.

Plans for September are hazy, some timetabling plans are being put together with the possibility of staggering attendance, with alternate weeks for year 12 and year 13 students but details are currently vague and staff are anxious that they do not have a clear idea what the College will look like. The College has recently announced 35 FTE redundancies, all from support staff posts across the College. Several long serving teaching staff have already agreed voluntary severance packages, though the numbers are currently unknown. The new Skills hub will not be up and running in September as the project has been paused by the pandemic and with the recent news that INTU has gone into administration, the whole Broadmarsh area refurbishment plan, including the new College building is now in doubt. The CEO and senior management team are talking about a 'new era' for FE, including 'agile working', which apparently means 'flexibility'. A recent appointment to the leadership team is known to be an online learning

specialist so the signals being sent are fairly clear. Back in 2017, prior to merger, the College's Transaction Unit bid document "Excellence in Education" indicated future plans for a substantial amount of the curriculum to be delivered through new teaching and learning technologies. This kind of management-speak is, worryingly, exactly of the order that produced last year's bitter dispute that was resolved only after 16 days of intense strike action. All College staff will have a meeting with management on Friday 3rd July to be told more!

Margaret Davies

3. The Future of the Triple Lock

The State Pension (SP) is uprated by the triple lock: an increase in line with inflation, the rise in average earnings or 2.5% depending upon which is the greater. This generosity is moderated when it is realised that our SP is lower than in the majority of developed countries. Considered as a percentage of average earnings the OECD averages a replacement value of 62.9% whereas the UK only replaces 29%, leaving it near the bottom.

The Conservative manifesto pledged to maintain the triple lock. Mr Johnson has recently declared it to be sacrosanct, which reassured some and alarmed many. Despite those assurances, there are now many rumours that the triple lock will not survive in its present form.



Inflation is likely to decrease and some predict that it will be negative in the Autumn. The Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex suggests that 6.5 million jobs are now at risk due to the virus lockdown. It predicts a contraction in GDP and employment of 20% that will tend to depress increases in earnings. There is, however, a statistical anomaly that raises the increase in average earnings. The impact of furloughed wages this year would unwind in 2021. So even if wages in 2021 were lower than in 2019, the artificially low values of 2020 would produce a spurious jump in wages in 2021. Williams Towers Watson, one of the top three global insurance and advice companies, calculates that this would make it necessary to increase the SP by 18.3%. The obvious

approach would be to alter this anomalous value of one year for something more reflective of the real world. It does however provide Government with a “legitimate” excuse for permanently altering the triple lock.

Sir Steve Webb, previously Pensions Minister in the Coalition government, suggests an alternative change. Since he predicts that both inflation and average wage increases will be low, he targets the 2.5% component as the outlier that towers over the other two components of the triple lock. He suggests that 2.5% be cut to either 1.5% or 1%. As long as the UK SP remains so pitifully small (the Netherlands pension replaces 106% of the average wage) attempts to lower the formula for uprating its value must be opposed.

[Julian Atkinson](#)

4. Trade and the USA

The focus on Coronavirus detracts attention from a more insidious threat to public health.

Much as it is understandable that the Coronavirus is at the centre of media and public attention, particularly in a country where the death rate is very high, the fact that people’s focus is elsewhere allows the Government to get away with little scrutiny in other areas which may also have a long-term bearing on people’s health, for example the current trade talks with the US.

The Government have quietly dropped a number of promises its members made during the Leave and last election campaigns, hardly surprising as it is also backsliding (or at least trying to do so) on its commitments in the Political Declaration which sketched out the contours of the future relationship between the UK and the EU. One of these promises was not to lower food standards and in the context of a public health crisis, it is doubly worrying that the UK Government has already given in to US demands in the pursuit of a trade agreement which will add little value even by the Government’s own calculations. (Its own assessment is that the deal’s long-term boost to the economy will likely be around 0.1 percent.) The real purpose of the trade agreement is to undermine consumer and environmental protections by letting in products banned in the EU and by agreeing to an ISDS (Investor-state dispute settlement) mechanism which would make it extremely difficult to re-introduce such protections without incurring large fines for impinging on the future profits of corporations.

The totemic issues are chlorinated chicken and hormone-fed beef but it is the underlying regulatory framework which is the real cause for

concern regarding farming, the environment and health. The EU enshrined the precautionary principle in its treaties (and even this has not always been honoured in practice, cf. glyphosate). The latest iteration, the Lisbon Treaty states in Art. 191 (2) that “...that preventative action should be taken, ...environmental damage should as a priority be rectified at source and ... the polluter should pay.” (my emphasis) The US rejects this approach as protectionist and even when Obama was President, they tried to pressure the EU into abandoning the principle during the TTIP negotiations. Some of the Brexiters agree with the US that EU regulations are obstacles to “innovation”, particularly as the EU has expanded the precautionary principle to cover general product safety, the use of additives for use in animal nutrition (e.g. hormones in beef), and the regulation of genetically modified (GM) food. In theory, EU regulations are intended to protect consumers but also to encourage less environmentally damaging farming practices. The Conservatives would, however, like to lower food prices (probably so that they can lower wages even further).

The US approach to food safety is different. They describe their approach as science-based or evidence-based (which are terms also used by the more fervent Brexiters), which means that it is incumbent upon consumers to demonstrate that a product or practice is dangerous or causes harm. For example, a 2007 double-blind study found that ingesting a number of food dyes appeared to increase children’s hyperactivity. These food dyes, which are common in the US, are banned in EU but a trade deal with the US will allow them to be imported into the UK. This might be less of an issue if food could be labelled accordingly but the US considers such requirements a barrier to trade and tries to argue that they are harmful. Resistance to labelling is even more problematic where it concerns genetically modified foods. These are not commonly labelled as such in the US and they are part of what the US wants to sell here.

Unfortunately, GM foods contain, or are treated with, pesticides which are probably carcinogenic and which threaten biodiversity and insect populations. Most of the ones in use in the US are currently banned in the EU (and thus in Britain) because they are suspected of being carcinogenic or harmful to health in other ways. Washing chicken carcasses in chlorine is seen as problematic because of the environment in which the chickens are kept and slaughtered.

It is not just a matter of US imports. The Brexiters are not really interested in an agreement with the

EU as the EU will protect its market from US imports coming from the UK. 60% of British food exports go to EU countries and, even with a trade agreement, farmers will encounter problems because mutual recognition (on which frictionless trade is predicated) will disappear at the end of the year. If they will have to compete with cheap US imports, they will have to adopt the lower standards.

The trade bill currently going through Parliament effectively also removes any parliamentary scrutiny from trade negotiations and trade agreements; it gives the Government a free hand. While people are, rightly, concerned at the way the Government is handling the Coronavirus, a much more insidious threat to health is shaping up and which will be more difficult to fight because it will mean taking on large corporations in offshore courts. Let's hope the blog from the LSE is correct which suggests that the current Congress is unlikely to ratify such a deal.

Harry Ziegler

5. Covid-19 and Widening Inequality



After Covid-19 first appeared, earlier this year, it became apparent that age, gender, race, income and underlying health problems made some patients more vulnerable than others.

Now, as this dreadful virus kills thousands, with the UK having some of the highest figures in the world, there is mounting evidence that socioeconomic factors, specifically connected to income and ethnicity heavily influence who becomes sick and who dies.

Recent studies have highlighted how people from BAME backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to die from Covid-19 than their white counterparts. For example, a National Critical Care audit across the UK showed that BAME deaths in the UK amongst health care workers were 2-4 times the rate of their white colleagues. Many of these workers played a visible role in caring for patients in their communities. In a recent BMA survey of 16,000 health workers, BAME doctors

were three times more likely to report being put under pressure to work on Covid-19 wards, without adequate PPE. Surveys also show that these groups also feel less able to speak out against lack of PPE and say that their BAME status puts them at higher risk.

An ITV News survey of 4,000 anonymous responses quotes one respondent as saying: "...we were threatened with the sack if we spoke out about PPE." We know that, compared to other sections of the population, BAME groups can have higher rates of hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease; however, this alone cannot account for higher Covid-19 risk factors. Of particular concern, is the government's response to these higher figures for BAME people, which seems to focus mostly on alleged genetic factors. Professor Nishi Chaturverdi, an epidemiologist at UCL has said that: "...there's no evidence that genes explain the excess risk from Covid-19; it's important to put a nail on that one, because it feels as if we can abdicate any responsibility for sorting this out."

Several studies show that deprivation is a crucial determinant of Covid infection and death. Recent ONS figures show that in England and Wales, the most deprived areas in the Index of Multiple Deprivation have the highest Covid-19 death rate. The Index indicates that black people are over half as likely again as the national average to be in the 'persistent low income' category, while Asian people are twice as likely to be in that category. Similarly, women working in 'low-skilled' care jobs are twice as likely to die from Covid-19 than those in professional jobs. In London, 67% of the adult social care workforce is BAME.

Before the Coronavirus pandemic, the BAME population were already more likely to suffer ill-health; much of this was linked to a more general standard of social and economic inequality. A University of Oxford review of 3,600 Covid-19 test results, of people of all ethnic backgrounds, showed that those living in the most deprived areas of Britain, were four times more likely to test positive and a third more likely to die from Covid-19 than those living in the richest areas.

Dr Devi Sridhar, Chair of Global Public Health at Edinburgh University has said that: "...if we look back to March, if you were networked and rich enough, you could purchase a Coronavirus test, yet a health care worker with symptoms did not have access to one." Add this to the inadequate accommodation and poor pay that health workers and others in low-paid jobs have had to endure and we have a powerful virus cocktail. Overcrowding,

shared toilets, kitchens and bathrooms – often with other families – are all detrimental to health. People cannot easily shield or self-isolate and infections can spread more widely. The ITV survey also revealed that NHS staff at lower grades have higher death rates and that ethnic minority staff are overrepresented in this group. This is a shocking cause for alarm and it emphasises that race cannot be separated from issues of class inequality.

It is vitally important that the government should not play off one group of workers against another, with suggestions of genetic susceptibility. Inadequate PPE, bullying bosses and other material conditions contribute to risk for all workers, regardless of ethnicity, but as has been pointed out, BAME workers are often in the forefront of those facing these conditions.

It is clear that the impact of Covid-19 has not just highlighted pre-existing inequalities in the UK, but has also entrenched them even further. In addition to the experience of BAME people, other groups have also suffered unequal treatment during the crisis. Many people are now experiencing a loss of income due to self-isolation, job losses, furlough and business closures. The Parliamentary Works and Pensions Committee has shown that 75% of those surveyed do not think that Universal Credit covers their basic living costs, such as food, rent, utilities and internet access (the latter vital for employees and children working at home). People on low incomes cannot always 'choose' to work from home; their children cannot always easily home school. 5 million children have experienced 'food insecurity', according to the Food Foundation. 5% of shielders are still working, as they cannot afford to live on UC (and of course are terrified of losing their jobs).

The lack of essential health care, the decrease in day-to-day services, lack of transport (such as not owning a car) can mean no access to health appointments or to 'Drive-through' test centres. In one area, a shielding group were told in a letter to 'wait in your car' to access their GP surgery. The high number of deaths in UK care homes (13 times that of, say, Germany) has been widely reported, with lack of testing and people being discharged from hospitals to return to care homes and infect others there; older people have been written off'. The 'Inequality List' goes on.

Late lockdown and, in my view, a premature easing of lockdown has cost not only thousands of lives, but also shone a spotlight on inherent UK inequalities. As the virus remains, without any vaccine available, we are on course to continue

with many more deaths and an ever-widening socioeconomic gap.

Judy Wills

6. The Financial Crisis of Care Homes

The crisis of Care Homes was evident well before the start of the pandemic. The Dilnott enquiry of 2011 suggested a very partial solution to the financial difficulties of adult care when he recommended a £35,000 cap on the amount an individual must pay for their own care costs during their lifetime. The Coalition Government announced that it would produce a Green Paper since when publication has been postponed seven times.

It seemed that the log jam would be broken when Boris Johnson, in his first speech after becoming PM in December 2019, said that he had a clear plan to fix the social care crisis. In January, without divulging the detail of this clear plan, he said that it would take five years to implement. Sadly, in June this year Matt Hancock announced that, due to the Coronavirus, it would not be "straightforward" to meet the Prime Minister's target of getting the long-awaited reforms under way. Back to Go and do not collect any adequate funding.

On average, councils overspent their adult social care budget by almost £900,000 in 2018-19, according to a snap survey by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care. The Local Government Association (LGA) said that the current system was at "breaking point" after decades of underfunding by successive administrations, and needed a massive cash injection. Services still face a funding gap of £3.5bn. According to the IPPR think-tank, councils should be given a £450m funding injection to ensure all care workers are paid the living wage. It warned that without a rise in real wages the sector could face a staff shortage of 400,000. 22,000 fewer older people are now receiving long-term care than in 2015-16. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show Britain is bottom of a league table of 20 leading countries when it comes to improvements in mortality for pensioners. Public health experts have blamed failings in care of the elderly and cuts to social services.

The root of the crisis in adult social care clearly lies in a lack of funding but also in the privatisation of the sector. The resource starvation suffered by Local Government has meant that they pay inadequate amounts to place old people in a largely (around 90%) private care home sector. This aspect is often advanced as the primary cause of

the financial instability of care homes. It is important to understand that the most rigorous analysis of this funding, in the report (*Where does the Money Go? Financialised chains and the crisis in residential care*) by the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) based at the University of East Anglia, opposes this view.

“Against this we use the follow the money research to show that the large care home chains are adept at taking money out (cash extraction) and prone to recurrent crisis because the chains are bought and sold frequently often using debt leveraged buyouts which means sale prices are inflated and the chains are loaded with ever more debt until the cash flow cannot cover the financing cost.”

Many of the Care Home chains, and most of the large ones, are owned by Private Equity conglomerates. Complex multi-level company structures, using tax havens like Guernsey or the Cayman Islands, make operations opaque and allow assets and liabilities (as well as earnings) to be moved about. There is substantial tax avoidance and money can be leached out of the Care Home often by the vehicle of running up debt which is covered by loans at high interest rates from other parts of the Private Equity empire. The result of this model is that public money is syphoned into private hands. If the Care Home goes bust, financial engineering ensures that the owners are first in line to be paid their “debts” and sometimes the site value of the home enables a profit to be made from the collapse.

The latest research from Open Democracy by Sheila Smith (*Termite Capitalism*) updates the story. Southern Cross, after its collapse, was taken over by the largest care home group, HC-One, which has 328 homes and 17,000 residents. These homes have experienced 700 COVID-related deaths. HC-One is now asking for a bailout from local authorities because of falling occupancy rates. But HC-One has a corporate structure in which well over £50 million has been syphoned off to the Cayman Islands in the last three years in the form of rent and interest payments, the latter at rates of up to 18% per year. The case of HC-One is also interesting because the Executive Chairman, Sir David Behan, was formerly in charge of the Care Quality Commission – the body responsible for inspecting care homes. HC-One has a complex corporate structure like many private equity owned businesses, containing a web of more than 50 companies – six of which are registered in the Cayman Islands or Jersey. Despite declaring a loss every year except one since its creation in 2011, HC-one paid dividends of £48.5 million in 2017-2019.

Allied Healthcare is now in “financial difficulties”. It looks after 9,300 old people across 84 local authorities and provides services to the NHS. It is owned by the highly profitable German Private Equity company Aurelius. It is no doubt lobbying for public funds to provide yet more money for its investors.

The financial problems of the Care Home industry cannot be solved just by pumping in more money. The privatisation has to be reversed so that money meant for old people does not leak out into the pockets of wealthy Private Equity funds. A further gain is that the old local government stewardship was characterised by better wages for staff who were trained and actually stayed in the job!

[Julian Atkinson](#)

7. Me, SAGE and the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 Pandemic has dominated our lives for most of 2020. Our reactions to it will have been and will continue to be many and varied, according to our individual experiences and personality. We have been told from the beginning that our leaders have been “following the science”. This sounds quite straightforward and, in itself, very reassuring. Until one starts to dig deeper and explore the related questions: which science, whose science and anyway are they really following it? From the beginning of what was to become a pandemic, I have been concerned about what the “scientific” truth was and is. I am sure that we do not know the answers yet. As always, I remain cautiously optimistic that we will know the truth (or truths) one day. In part, we are in the realm of unknown knowns, known unknowns and so forth, but across a whole range of disciplines: virology, epidemiology, statistics, immunology, psychology and many more.

The relationship between science, politics and society is far more complex than the government would have us believe. There is no such thing as the “best science available”. Scientists regularly disagree, about theoretical approaches, methodologies, findings, and interpretations. Decisions about what scientific advice is taken can be highly political as well as financial. The individuals, disciplines and institutions that are invited to the table reflect and affect prestige and influence.

This naturally brings us to SAGE, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. SAGE is responsible for ensuring “that timely and coordinated scientific advice is made available to decision makers to support UK cross-government

decisions". The advice provided by SAGE does not form official government policy. Currently, the group is chaired by the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance and co-chaired by the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, and includes "experts from within government and leading specialists from the fields of healthcare and academia". SAGE takes advice from a variety of expert groups, including:

- New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG)
- Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (SPI-M) (Department for Health and Social Care)
- Independent Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviours (SPI-B)

These groups consider scientific evidence and feed in their conclusions to SAGE. It is likely that some of the academics who are part of these groups are also UCU members. At least one, who has been prominent in the media, was a contemporary of this correspondent in his early days as an AUT activist: his politics still seem sound! The purpose of these advisory committees is to distil existing scientific research so it can inform policy. But such advice is constrained by the questions that are asked. What is prioritised at such moments is a matter of political judgment. Is it the mortality rate, or the economy or poll ratings? What questions politicians *don't* ask also matters. Politicians tend to prefer science that gives them the answers that they want. This can lead to "policy-based evidence".



Further confounding factors in this advisory structure have been the lack of transparency in the membership of SAGE, together with the lack of clarity concerning the role of the Prime Minister's Special Advisor, one Dominic Cummings, coupled with the observation that a high proportion of SAGE's membership were on the government payroll. It remains unclear what the extent of Cummings' influence, and that of his associate Ben Warner, has been but there are many who believe that it will not have been helpful. It was not until 4th

May 2020 that the membership of SAGE was revealed. This confirmed that a high proportion of those involved were government scientific advisors or employed in parts of the NHS. This does not mean that their views are not independent of the government, but it certainly does not help the appearance of independence.

A high-profile reaction to these arrangements has been the creation of Independent SAGE. It describes its formation in the following way "... on Monday May 4th, the Independent SAGE convened as a group of preeminent experts from the UK and around the world. The aim of the Independent SAGE was and is to provide robust, independent advice to HM Government with the purpose of helping the UK navigate COVID-19 whilst minimising fatalities." It is chaired by former Government Chief Scientific Advisor Sir David King and draws on a range of international and British experts.

The setting up of Independent Sage tells us a great deal. It highlights that science is not a single undisputed edifice, independent of humanity. It is a human endeavour, with contested ideas, different perspectives and constrained by politics. I am writing this section on Tuesday 23rd June, a day which is being described by one media outlet in the following terms "As lockdown ends, it's time to get back to the British freedom we love and end coronaphobia". Earlier some scientist friends brought my attention to a report by Independent Sage entitled "Review of Scientific Evidence on 2-Metre Versus 1-Metre Social Distancing". This report's headline finding is summarised as follows:

Independent SAGE warns that it is not safe to relax social distancing rules for indoor settings and that the government's proposal to reduce to 1 metre will 'effectively end' social distancing in Britain.

You will know by now that the government introduced its new guideline for social distancing of 1 metre +, when 2 metres is not possible. You will all have seen no doubt that even reputable organs are already abbreviating this to 1 metre, without the "+" and without the caveat of 2 metres not being possible. Commentators are discussing whether this, in practice, means the end of social distancing. This illustrates the fantasy of "following the science". There is no dispute about the fact that social distancing inhibits the transmission of Covid-19 but when you take the journey from there to government policy, it becomes ever more uncertain. How distant is effective, in what circumstances, for whom, what level of risk is one willing to accept? This is before we start balancing health against economic factors. Hence the science

can be bent this way and that way, without ever becoming one clear entity.

What can we learn from this situation? There is more than one version of the science that we can follow. We must recognise that there can genuinely be more than one interpretation of a situation, as seen through scientific investigation. Concepts such as risk will be seen differently by different people. This is partly a result of different personality traits: some people are risk-prone, others risk-averse. It is also affected by individual situations. If you, or a loved one, has a relevant health condition, your view of social distancing will probably be different from someone who is fully healthy, who only mixes with healthy people under the age of 45. In changing the social distancing guidelines, the government (and it is the government, not the scientists) has decided on a societal scale to look at risk differently from how Independent SAGE would recommend. The government managed to persuade SAGE to sign off on the new guidelines but the obvious caution and concern of the Chief Scientific Advisor and the Chief Medical Officer at the government briefing seems indicative of their probable reluctance. Essentially, the government has taken the view that the risk of damage to the UK economy from the two metre rule is of greater significance than the risk of extra death and disease from going to one metre plus. Both views are based on following the science but other factors are also brought into play, in particular economics and politics. Science, as everything else, is political, and is affected by politics. It does not stand alone.

[Rob Kirkwood](#)

8. Climate Change in a time of Pandemic

During the current crisis as many of us have been self-isolating or shielding, we have probably appreciated the very unusual peace and quiet giving us the opportunity to hear birdsong, observe the natural world in our gardens or window boxes, look at the lovely blue sky and see more bright stars at night.

Worldwide improvements in air quality have featured in news photographs of clear views in normally fogged cities and generally improved health for those suffering with lung conditions. An interesting survey used the reduction in noise pollution in May to encourage people to record early morning birds on their phones and send them to the "Dawn Chorus" website. Early results apparently revealed diverse wild symphonies. In London, the earliest bird song was from blackbirds

and robins, closely followed by wood pigeons, crows, magpies, and others including parakeets. This clearer air and reduced pollution, has been happening in Europe and all over the world, so surely the effect of so much less road and air traffic and the shut-down of polluting industries and power stations must have had a beneficial effect on our atmosphere?



Much greater use of green energy has been reported as fossil fuel powered electricity stations have been closed down while heavy industry is slowed. Here in Britain it has been suggested there could be a collapse in the fossil fuel industry "by accelerating a terminal decline for the world's most polluting companies." Findings from the International Energy Agency forecast a severe plunge in demand and within that, the demand for fossil fuel has dropped by almost 10%. Certainly, those of us who have occasionally ventured out will have noticed the lower price of petrol.

Our UK electricity system recorded its greenest ever month in May, fifty-four days running without using its last remaining coal power plants, one of which is nearby Ratcliffe power station from which no smoke has been seen for some time. The bright and breezy weather helped wind and solar power generation but gas-powered energy is also recorded in the results. This record low demand for electricity, together with a near record output of renewable energy apparently gave the National Grid a bit of a headache while managing subsidies and switching off excess production. In spite of all this good news, the Carbon Dioxide level in the atmosphere has still risen to a new peak this year according to readings from an observatory in the US. CO2 emissions from livestock farming and other industries have continued despite lockdowns, so although the Covid-19 crisis has slowed down emissions, it has not been enough to make any significant difference to the general picture which is very complex and depends on many other aspects.

In a statement on the UK Environment Agency website published on June 3rd 2020, "Green

recovery of the economy and society after Covid-19”, the UK delegation to the OSCE (organisation for security and co-operation in Europe) statement was delivered by Justin Addison, Second Secretary at the UK delegation. This stated: “Covid-19 has led to an unprecedented shutdown of large parts of the global economy, with severe consequences for all countries. ... We will uphold the Paris Agreement ... as a crucial framework for guiding the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis.” He also used phrases such as “creating a more inclusive economy” and suggested that “a science-led, clean and resilient recovery will create employment in the industries of the future while ensuring we address the linked challenges of public health, climate change and biodiversity.”

In order to widen job prospects and boost the economy, development of these “Climate jobs” in such industries of the future, will be essential. For example, these could be workers building more solar, wave and tidal power, work on insulation and renovation of buildings or public transport systems to use renewable electricity. Education and training at all levels to support skills, knowledge and creative technical development will be essential too.

What can we personally do in response to all this? Although it may seem very small scale, as individuals we can get involved through use of our spending power such as consideration of where we keep our money, which banks and investments are involved, where we shop and what we buy. For example, how many air miles our groceries have travelled or where our clothes have been made. We can also lobby our MPs and support campaigns by organisations such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, or student strikes with Greta Thunberg and other organisations.

Information for this piece came from a variety of sources including The Environment Agency, Campaign against Climate Change (“One Million Climate Jobs” 2014 edition), and press reports including in The Guardian.

Rowena Dawson

9. UCU Retired Members Branch

Our branch has been meeting since 2008 and now has over 300 members. Our aims are listed below. We meet three times a year, often in places of interest to make part of a day out. Meetings focus on important issues for UCU pensioners and

provide a chance to talk with other retired members.

A termly newsletter with articles of interest to retired UCU members is e-mailed to all branch members for whom we have addresses and to UCU branch secretaries in the East Midlands and to other RMBs.

Please let us have your personal e-mail address and let us know if it changes.

RMB Roles and Functions

- To represent the interests of retired members within the union.
- To represent the interests of retired union members within the wider union and pensioner movements.
- To provide a forum within the union for retired members to come together to consider and debate matters of mutual interest.
- To provide a resource of collective memory, advice and expertise in support of the union, in particular to those still in active employment.
- To provide active support, where appropriate, by involving the broadest section of the branch in support of the wider interests of the union and its members, including support for those still in active employment.

For more information
please contact Julian Atkinson
e-mail: secretary@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
telephone: 01773 532105

website: www.ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
twitter: @ucu-em-rmb

East Midlands Branch officers and committee
Chair: Angus McLardy: chair@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
Vice-Chair: Rowena Dawson vice-chair@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
Secretary: Julian Atkinson: secretary@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
Assistant Secretary: Rob Kirkwood
asst-secretary@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
Treasurer: Brian Hambidge treasurer@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
Equalities officer: Judy Wills
equalities-officer@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
Membership: Greg Cejer membership@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
Newsletter: Bob Haskins
newsletter@ucu-em-rmb.org.uk
East Midlands regional UCU committee
representatives: Brian Hambidge, Rob Kirkwood