



University IT Downtime in January 2012

It was announced on Sussed that ALL of the University's IT systems will be offline for maintenance for a few days in early January, and a number of you contacted us about this. We approached Malcolm Ace (Chief Operating Officer) raising your concerns. He assures us that all other alternatives were properly considered, including carrying out the work over the Christmas break. However, the associated risks meant that early January was deemed the "least worst" time for the work, and internal deadlines (such as the tuition payment deadline for students) will be shifted as appropriate. We asked for reassurance that staff would not be put under any additional pressure to take their annual leave at this time and were told "no pressure on taking holiday, although of course it may be that staff were already planning holiday or it would be an opportune time to do so".

=====

UNISON's message to Malcolm:

"Malcolm,

I have received a few enquiries from members about the proposed downtime of systems in January.

As I understand it, the downtime is so that the University can carry out maintenance on, and upgrade, the power systems. Whilst I accept that this is absolutely essential work, the comments I have received have commented on the associated problems with taking IT systems offline during standard office hours, at what is a very busy time for most of the University's Professional Services.

So much of the work of our Professional Services relies on our IT systems that I do not think it fanciful to suggest that productivity of the PS staff during this period could be as low as 20% or worse. My experience of these situations is that staff start off with the best of intentions of making themselves useful, tidying desks, making notes of phone calls on bits of paper, but quickly end up drinking tea and chatting; there is simply nothing else to do without the IT systems functioning. I remember that during the last outage, so much desk-tidying was going on that one of the document shredders down here blew up under the strain.

As you know, in the first week of January there is a payment deadline for tuition fees, one of the peak times for the University in terms of taking payments from students, and our ability to take payment over the phone or online is likely to be severely hampered.

I understand from comments about previous systems outages that e-mails sent to us during the downtime can be lost completely, and if this happens it will create a poor impression of customer service, at a time when giving the best possible student experience is crucial to the University's future.

As union representative, I am concerned that members of staff may feel under pressure to take that week as annual leave, which means they would then have less time to take off at times of the year more convenient for them. This is clearly of greatest importance to those with families and caring responsibilities.

Can I ask what consideration UEG gave to offering enhanced payments to have the maintenance work carried out on University closure days during Christmas week? I would have thought that the additional staff cost during that week would be negligible when compared to the lost productivity of paying hundreds of MSA staff to do very little for two or three days.

Of course I understand that there may well be very good reasons for having to carry out the work that week, but this is not clear from the Sussed announcement. If you could let me have a statement on the above points I can update our members accordingly.

Many thanks,

Adrian"

=====

His response:

"Adrian, Thanks for your comments, which are entirely reasonable.

I have discussed with iSolutions alternatives. The obvious method of pushing the outage into the Christmas holiday has been discussed, but unfortunately there are so many external suppliers involved and we would then be at the mercy of their working habits. It was seen as too great a risk to try to build both the internal and external teams over the holiday period.

As far as key internally set dates are concerned, these will have to move (the fee payment is a good example). I'm copying Carol and Sue into this so that they are aware of the issue. It is probably the least worst time that the work can be done, but that's not to underestimate the disadvantages it brings.

Malcolm"

=====

When asked "Can I reassure them that they will not be put under any extra pressure to take their annual leave in that week in particular?" he replied:

"Adrian, No pressure on taking holiday, although of course it may be that staff were already planning holiday or it would be an opportune time to do so."