

The Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
London
SW1P 3BT

16 August 2023

Dear Minister,

UCU's ongoing industrial action in the Higher Education (HE) sector

Thank you for your letter to UCEA of 11 August raising concerns surrounding the ongoing dispute and industrial action campaign, including the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) by the University and College Union (UCU) over pay and working conditions in the higher education sector.

UCEA's partnership with the sector trade unions (UCU, EIS, GMB, UNISON and Unite) is something which we and the HE sector value highly and it is a matter of genuine regret that trade unions are in dispute with our member HE institutions. As you know UCEA negotiates the pay uplift annually with the sector unions through the New Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (New JNCHES). For 2023-24 we negotiated on behalf of 143 HE Institutions.

It is disheartening that UCU urged its members to cause disruption at what is an important time for students during the academic year. As you know, it was out of a genuine concern for their employees that HEIs agreed to propose to the trade unions an early start to the 2023-24 pay round. We agreed a process which led to pay uplifts of between 5 to 8 percent, nearly half of which was delivered from February 2023 to staff six months early, to ease cost of living pressures.

The acceleration in 2023-24 negotiations led to a minimum uplift of £1,000 on all points from February, with a further increase from 1 August. The total pay uplift for [2023-24 of between 8 and 5%](#) is at the limits of the UK sector's affordability. Anything more was unaffordable for a significant number of HEIs and [a number have deferred the uplift](#).

While there is no more we can offer on pay, UCEA continues to remain committed to negotiations with UCU and the other trade unions, on the basis of [Acas proposals that were agreed in talks in March this year](#). For some months we have urged UCU to pause its boycott, accept the Acas terms of reference and come back to the negotiating table.

We were pleased that UCU agreed to join us at exploratory talks, meetings which UCEA convened; we met on Friday 14 July and [agreed a joint statement](#) and met again on 21 and 27 July. On 31 July I wrote to UCU [offering to make a recommendation](#) to member HE institutions to phase deductions of pay related to the MAB in return for a halt to the boycott.

UCEA

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In her response to me on 2 August, Jo Grady, UCU's General Secretary chose not to address our ongoing commitment to discuss the pay spine; use of contract types and improving job security; workload and further reducing the gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps in the sector. Instead, she referred to '*UCEA's punitive terms*', in short UCU refuses to return to talks unless employers 'refund' pay legally withheld for partial performance by HE Institutions from staff who took strike action under the MAB. This is a position that employers cannot accept.

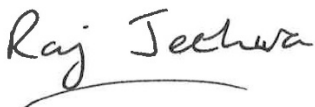
In my response to UCU of 4 August and in a separate letter to the Joint Trade Union Side Secretaries I reiterated our offer to join all five trade unions again in Acas facilitated talks to discuss the scope of the review of sector finances and in quick succession revisit the Terms of Reference for other pay-related matters. All of these letters are openly accessible on [our website](#).

UCEA met with all five national officers of the sector trade unions as recently as 10 August where the trade unions confirmed acceptance of our proposal for a joint review of sector finances. We were expecting to hear from them today regarding their view on Acas facilitation on this piece of work. It is therefore very unfortunate that UCU continues to claim that it is the employers who are refusing to meet them to resolve the dispute. We are yet to formally hear from UCU and the other trade unions as to when talks can commence.

I trust you will recognise that HE employers continue to be constructive in navigating a challenging environment of unusually high inflation and extremely stretched institutional finances. HE employers have put in significant mitigation in place to ensure minimal disruption to students, including protecting students interests.

We hope that UCU members will read your letter to UCU and to consider their positions, not least given that the pay uplift is comparable to those in other sectors of the economy and industrial action directly harms students.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Raj Jethwa". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Raj Jethwa
Chief Executive
Universities and Colleges Employers Association