

Briefing note: Impact of UCU's Marking and Assessment Boycott

Background

In Autumn 2022, UCEA approached the sector's trade unions, including the University and College Union (UCU), to propose an early start to the 2023-24 pay round for higher education staff in order to address the cost of living pressures facing staff in the sector. In January, UCEA and the unions agreed to begin pay talks early and on an accelerated timescale. As a result, the pay uplift for 2023-24 ranged from 5% to 8%, with almost half of the uplift delivered six months early. The acceleration in 2023-24 negotiations led to a minimum uplift of £1,000 on all points from February 2023, with a further increase from August.

Following the conclusion of the first phase of the accelerated negotiations, focusing on the pay uplift, UCEA and the unions reached through Acas for Terms of Reference for more talks to take place on non-pay matters, including:

- Reform of the pay spine
- Use of contract types
- Workload
- Further reducing the gender, ethnicity and disability pay gaps in the sector

Despite agreement through Acas, UCU's Higher Education Committee recommended the rejection of these terms of reference in a consultation with its members. Following a 56% vote in favour of rejection, UCU then announced a marking and assessment boycott (MAB) from 20 April 2023.

Impact of the marking and assessment boycott

UCEA has been conducting regular surveys of HE institutions to understand the impact of the MAB. Our latest data is based on returns from 120 HEIs. This represents 84% of the 144 institutions that are involved in the marking and assessment boycott. Returns from these HEIs account for approximately 80% of the final year undergraduate population. The survey ran from 16 to 22 August. Within this sample:

- 93 HEIs (78% of the sample) reported that all of their final year students have now been able to graduate.
- A further 14 HEIs (12%) reported that although some final year students are still yet to graduate, this represented less than 2% of their final year students.
- While 6 HEIs (5%) reported that between 2% and 10% of their students are yet to graduate, a further 7 HEIs (6%) reported that more than 10% of their final year students are still yet to graduate.
- The 120 HEIs that have responded to the survey reported that a total of 11,325 final year students have still yet to graduate. This represents 2% of the final year student population (526,379) of these responding institutions.
- 92 HEIs reported the number of final year students who have graduated but were affected in other ways (i.e. delayed graduation, graduating without a classification or without all marks). Across these institutions, 19,667 final year students have graduated but were affected in this way. This means that 6% of the final year student population of the 120 responding institutions were either unable to graduate or were otherwise affected by the MAB.

- With regard to staff participation in the MAB, a total of 6,065 members of academic staff were reported as currently participating in the MAB. This represents a decrease of over a quarter from these institutions' estimates of the peak number of staff participating in the MAB (8,531).

Despite this feedback that the impact across the sector of UCU's marking and assessment boycott is limited and isolated, this provides little comfort to the students who continue to bear the repercussions, nor to the HE institutions and the staff who have been working tirelessly to try to help these students.

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