

Beth Winter
Member of Parliament for Cynon Valley
House of Commons
Westminster
London SW1A 0AA

10 May 2023

Dear Ms Winter,

UCU's ongoing industrial action in the Higher Education sector

Thank you for your letter raising concerns surrounding the ongoing dispute and potentially damaging industrial action campaign by the University and College Union (UCU) over pay and working conditions in the higher education sector.

Our partnership with the sector's trade unions (UCU, EIS, GMB, UNISON and Unite) is something which UCEA and the sector values highly and it is a matter of genuine regret that the trade unions are in dispute with HE institutions. 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 144 HE Institutions.

UCU's Marking and Assessment Boycott

It is disheartening that UCU is urging its members to cause disruption at this important time for students during the academic year.

In your letter you question the justification for withholding pay, but it would be unfair not to do so for those students HE employers are trying to protect. Furthermore, while all HE institutions respect their highly regarded employees' right to take lawful industrial action, UCU in turn needs to respect that HE institutions are legally entitled to withhold pay for not fulfilling contracts. As responsible autonomous employers they are fully focused on managing this period of potential disruption as best as they can for their students. HE institutions have a duty to protect students and so they reject partial performance. In doing so they are legally entitled to withhold full pay for partial performance of duties such as a Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB). UCU is fully aware of this and has a responsibility to explain to its members the consequences of their actions.

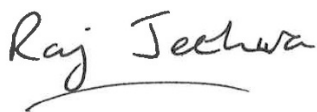
Sector finances and the pay uplift

UCU should also be honest and open with its members about the fact that there is no possibility of new or revised pay offers in the 2023-24 pay round. As a national collective, employers have looked after staff as best we can with [a pay uplift for 2023-24 that was six months earlier than usual](#) and which at between 5 and 8% is the highest in nearly 20 years of collective HE pay negotiations. Both HE employers and the sector trade unions wanted to reach an agreement and end the ongoing dispute. During March UCEA met with the trade unions in Acas facilitated talks which led to mutually agreed [Terms of Reference](#) to enable talks to continue on 'non-pay matters'.

Despite the financial pressures facing the wider sector, this year's pay award is comparable to settlements in the wider economy. Most HE institutions continue to face considerable financial uncertainty, with many posting deficits. In England 'Home' student tuition fees have been frozen until at least 2025-26, the Welsh Government Budget shows a cut to higher education funding for 2023-24, the Scottish Government has only last week announced a [£20m reduction](#) to the amount promised in its draft Budget and in Northern Ireland the Department for the Economy's budget for further and higher education could be cut by almost 20% in 2023-24. Many HE institutions are also looking at substantial increases in employer contributions to the Teacher's Pension Scheme from [23.7%](#) which could rise to nearer 30% from April 2024.

I trust you will recognise that HE employers have tried to be constructive in navigating a challenging environment of unusually high inflation and extremely stretched institutional finances. We hope that you will therefore urge UCU and the other sector trade unions 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