

# Marking & Assessment Boycott FAQs

This document covers the upcoming marking and assessment boycott. These FAQs should be read in conjunction with the UCU National FAQs: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/MABoycottFAQs>

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## 1. What is a marking and assessment boycott? When will it take place?

**From 23rd May, action short of a strike (ASOS) in the form of a marking and assessment boycott will commence.**

This means that you should refuse to carry out any duties relating to marking and assessment. It is particularly important that you do not upload any grades to Canvas / SpeedGrader, TurnItIn or commit them to writing on any university system.

However, you should expect and offer to carry on with your other duties as normal.

If you are not scheduled or asked to carry out any duties relating to marking and assessment, you should work as normal during this period. However, if you are subsequently asked to carry out such duties, you should refuse to do so. No colleague should under any circumstances mark work that was previously assigned to another colleague who is participating in the boycott. This undermines the marking boycott, the sacrifices of your colleagues, and academic standards.

## 2. What does the boycott cover?

No feedback or grading should be given through formal channels, written or electronic. Our goal is to apply pressure on the University Executive so that they agree concessions on local demands and lobby UCEA and UUK to meet our national demands as swiftly as possible. The less pressure we apply at the outset, the more likely that it will be ineffective, forcing us to prolong the action.

All marking and assessment is covered both Undergraduate and Postgraduate – all taught postgraduate summative assessment; PhD final vivas and MPhil to PhD progression/confirmation vivas/assessments. The assessment boycott is not restricted to final examinations, but includes any form of in-course continuous assessment. It will include traditional essay marking, but also assessment of any student work falling within the formal assessment defined above, including, for example, the assessment of projects and dissertations, laboratory and other practical work, performance (i.e. in music or drama) and supervised practice (i.e. in teacher education). Examination of dissertations and theses at postgraduate level, as well as vivas, are included in the action.

## 3. Is the boycott action for permanent staff only, or should hourly paid members and PostGraduate Researchers (PGRs) take part? And if so, what if assessment is paid out only on condition of marking?

To be successful this action requires a coordinated, critical mass of UCU members to participate so that marking duties cannot simply be passed on to colleagues. To achieve maximum leverage it is absolutely crucial that members stand together.

PGRs (GTAs) and hourly paid members should most certainly take part. Casualisation is one of the key issues in The Four Fights dispute – and the more inclusive the boycott, the stronger the leverage. We have local demands on the conditions of PGRs & hourly paid staff.

Finance is, of course, a huge worry for precarious workers. **Newcastle UCU has a local Hardship Fund.**

<https://ncl.web.ucu.org.uk/industrial-action/ucu-local-strike-support-fund/>

We can make this an inclusive action if members who don't face deductions can donate to the local Hardship Fund, in solidarity with those who are on the front line.

For more information on financial support see final section of this document.

#### 4. How can members who do not have assessment as part of their workload, for example professional service and administrative staff, take part in the action?

ASOS ("working to contract") continues. Members who are not marking can track their hours, work to their contracted hours a week and stop performing activities that are not in their contract: in some cases this would mean not attending recruitment/open days, meetings, and refusing any additional workload. If any UCU members in professional services are involved in inputting data or compiling marks ahead of exam board meetings, our ASOS requires them not to participate in these activities. They may also consider donating to the local strike fund if punitive deductions are taken from other members.

#### 5. Migrant workers and taking industrial action (including marking boycott)

References to lawful industrial action include both strike action and action short of a strike (ASOS); this includes marking boycotts. This means **it is lawful for migrant workers to participate in industrial action, including marking and assessment boycott**. For more specific guidelines for migrant workers see [here](#).

#### 6. What about oral and practical examinations or degree exhibitions.

In the case of oral and practical examinations and degree exhibitions for undergraduates and Masters' students, you can invigilate these examinations as normal, to prevent disruption to students. But you *should not* submit any written feedback or numerical marks, or participate in any moderation procedures.

#### 7. Are PhD Mock Vivas, Viva examination and response to written PhD level work allowed in the Boycott?

UCU head office released the following statement on 13 May 2022: "Examination of dissertations and theses at postgraduate level, **as well as vivas**, are included in the action." There are some exceptions for international students whose immigration status depend on progressing and/or receiving marks. For more details on this see the following section (students).

#### 8. How do we deal with automatic marking? In some departments there is a good deal of marking that happens automatically, through online quizzes and other systems that are already in place and running. Should we take active steps to disable these systems?

No, **we cannot recommend interfering in automated marking systems**. That said, any points in the chain of production that are not automated and in which staff moderate, standardise,

compile or submit grades can be part of the boycott. Those for whom this is not the case can participate in the other aspects of ASOS.

## 9. If there is a live presentation before a hand in, do both constitute assessment, making them both subject to boycott?

This depends on the process: if the presentation is assessed, you should attend the presentation but not participate in discussions about marks or submit marks. If not – and assessment occurs separately on the basis of material submitted later/independently, then the oral presentation would not be boycotted, since it is not the assessment point. Informal feedback at that stage would not be breaking the boycott.

## 10. Is exam-setting covered by the action?

Yes. From the UCU website – “If your role involves administration relating to marking and assessment, you can refuse to undertake that work as part of the action. Examples might include the preparation of examination board materials, the allocation of marking and moderation duties, or any other administrative tasks related to assessment or marking”. Writing exam questions for any assessment that falls within the mandate is covered by the Boycott.

## 11. Shall I still arrange and/or attend exam boards?

You should not allocate or reallocate marking, including to hourly paid staff or externally recruited staff, nor should you organise moderation processes or examination boards. You should also not participate in exam boards or prepare material for External Examiner(s).

## 12. What happens if part of your team/School is marking as usual?

That doesn't change the action of those participating in the boycott. We can't stop others from doing their job. If some grades are missing, in general this means that moderation can't happen. In reality, senior management may find a workaround, but that doesn't negate the action of boycotting.

## 13. How should we discuss the marking boycott with non-UCU members in our school/department?

We encourage UCU members to send the following text to non-UCU members if approached by them and/or there is an attempt by senior management to get others to mark and/or assess your work:

We ask you not to participate in senior management's effort to pit staff members against each other and instead to sustain the collegial relations we have created over the years in the School, and not mark assessments that have been allocated to union members. **We therefore ask that you respond to any requests to mark assessments that have been allocated to union members by noting that you lack the expertise to adequately mark such assessments for courses you do not teach, and that you are already at full capacity in terms of workload** (even though you may not be a union member, we have checked and **there are legal protections** for refusing to do so).

Marking assessments for modules delivered by union members participating in the marking boycott will have detrimental consequences for staff relations in our School for years to come, as staff are being asked to participate in an effort to undermine the basic social justice principles that union members have been fighting for, and which the University of Newcastle supposedly stands for. Moreover, using people to carry out the work union members are withdrawing is a well-known strategy of **union busting and we do not think that colleagues should participate in such tactics.**

Marking assessments without receiving guidelines from UCU members who lead modules will not reflect the expectations they conveyed to students and could potentially hurt the students. This will inevitably undermine the quality assurances that we give our students in terms of the integrity and fairness of the marking process.

#### **14. What happens when marking starts before the Boycott but will finish after the Boycott begins?**

The pace and scheduling of marking/assessment is up to individuals. It may be that some work in a unit is marked and some is not. That should mean that moderation can't take place and results can't be published. Again, Managers may try to work around this, but that isn't the responsibility of those who are taking lawful action.

The union is obliged to advise people to carry on 'as normal' until the boycott begins and then 'down tools'. No marks should be released unless a whole cohort has been assessed.

#### **15. Can I just mark and park? i.e, write feedback and grades and keep them on my laptop?**

Officially, marking and parking is not something we can advise, as completed assessment material is the property of our employers. Our marking and assessment boycott means that we will not be generating any marks or formal written feedback for the duration of the boycott. This also means that members should not carry out any assessment activity on Canvas or TurnItIn, should not share assessed material amongst colleagues, nor should they participate in moderation or standardisation meetings etc.

Our ultimate objective is not to refuse grades/feedback to our students. We do want to be able to return assessments and exams to students who have worked hard to complete their work. But in our current dispute, not generating marks and feedback is a strategy through which we can build leverage in order to push University Executives to concede to our demands and pressure UCEA and UUK to meaningfully negotiate.

#### **16. What happens when we are on annual leave? Do we have to return from leave and do the marking?**

When you are on leave, you should be paid as normal, irrespective of the boycott. In the hope the issue has been resolved through an acceptable offer by your return, you could resume assessment. If not the boycott would continue.

## 17. Can Heads of School ask other members within the School (not taking action) to cover the marking (either the full marking or just moderating essays marked by a colleague not taking action) of members participating in the boycott?

Of course they can, as in *will*, ask. But that doesn't mean others need to do the marking. When colleagues are not observing ASOS, they will ask others to cover the work of those taking action. ASOS means that colleagues who are UCU members can refuse to cover the work of others, as part of the lawful Industrial Action. If pressured on this, you should contact Branch reps. How the work is covered is entirely the responsibility of senior management. It's not up to us to break a boycott to 'protect' others. If they join the action it will make it stronger – and give us more leverage.

## 18. When will the action end? Will I have to mark the assignments eventually?

This is impossible to know in advance with certainty, and will depend on the outcome of any negotiations with management. The action may be short if quick gains are made, but a long period of industrial action may also be necessary.

Whether marking will still need to be completed after the industrial action is over will depend on how long the action lasts and what, if any, mitigations the university puts in place. If marking still needs to be carried out after the action ends, it will have to be completed in a reasonable and safe time frame. This could lead to marking delays into the summer period. **If action is suspended then there will have to be a negotiated timeframe for turning marks around that is reasonable given our working hours and on-going ASOS.**

## 19. Does marking 'never' happen, or is it simply deferred until next term?

Clearly, students want grades and need results in order to progress or graduate, so senior leadership will take mitigating action in order to keep wheels turning. This means that assessment may be farmed-out to others, or they may bring in a pass/fail regime and bypass grades, or SMT may even assess themselves. As far as the boycott is concerned, that is outside our control.

Once, or if, the boycott is called off, then members can begin marking – if it hasn't already been done. Liverpool maximised the impact of their marking boycott by picking up assessment after the action ended, but taking the usual turnaround time. So a 3-week boycott meant that grades took 6 weeks to deliver.

## 20. Should I declare my participation in strike action or action short of a strike?

You are under no obligation to declare your intention to participate in industrial action in advance.

When asked by a person in authority (namely Head of HR, Head of School, but not someone without managerial responsibility, ie module leader or colleague) if you have participated in industrial action you must reply truthfully. The university has been officially notified that a marking and assessment boycott is taking place from 23 May. This is legal industrial action.

Jackie Scott, the Head of HR, has sent around an online form requesting that you declare whether you are taking part in the marking and assessment boycott. You are only required to fill this in, or reply to her by other means (with the relevant information), when you are actually participating in the marking assessment boycott actively, not if you intend to in the future. **Do not send it before such time.** As Jackie Scott says, the online form is open until 22 June.

# Students

## 21. How will a marking boycott impact on students on Tier 4 visas?

It is important that all students on Tier 4 visas are aware of their obligations under that visa. It is likely that a marking boycott will affect aspects of their studies. This might include delays to receiving grades and feedback on assignments, as well as disruptions to exams and the awarding of degrees.

We encourage members to make sure that international students whose visa status may be dependent on receiving grades are fully supported.

If students think that industrial action may affect their studies they should contact the university or student union for support.

## 22. How do we explain the action to students when they have already experienced so much disruption?

It is important to emphasise to students that:

The action was the only avenue available to us after UCEA, UUK and senior leadership across the country refused to meaningfully engage with staff and student unions on casualisation, workload, pay gaps and pay and pensions;

- We know that the current arrangement of Higher Education will have negative consequences for students, and the NUS are very supportive of the action for this reason;
- We want to work with students in applying pressure to management to ensure that we can resolve our dispute as swiftly as possible.

The committee has met and will continue to meet with NUSU. Slides for communicating with students have been distributed to members.

## 23. What about giving feedback to my students?

The marking and assessment boycott does not prevent staff from giving informal oral or written feedback to students on their work at their discretion. However, you should not upload grades to Canvas or Turnitin or commit numerical grades to writing on any university system.

You can continue to support students in making applications for jobs and further study, including by providing references which include predicted grades.

UCU members are committed to providing ongoing support to students throughout the action. This will mean that UCU members will be responsive to students' individual circumstances and will take all action possible within the bounds of the boycott to ensure that no students face detriment. As part of this we commit to:

- Provide informal feedback to students that occurs as part of ongoing teaching during the boycott;

- Support applications for further study/research/funding commenting on expected grades/performance where possible and appropriate;
- **Making sure any student depending on receiving their grades in order to access funding, or for the purposes of applying for further study or jobs is fully supported (i.e. write reference letters)..**
- **Making sure that international students whose visa status may be dependent on receiving grades are fully supported (i.e. be available to discuss their particular circumstances)** as this could have legal consequences for their immigration status, for more see question 21 above).
- Writing support letters advising funders/selection panels, and giving indications of students' past and expected performance where necessary and appropriate.

## 24. What if students need a mark to go on to further study (MAs, PhDs) or take up new jobs etc?

At Newcastle UCU, we encourage lecturers/tutors to write letters of reference and support for students – although they cannot write or refer to submitted grades (as they will not have been submitted). Such supporting letters/references may explain the context of the industrial action and give an indication of performance while noting that grades will come at a later date.

## 25. What resources can we share with students to explain the marking and assessment boycott?

Communication with students will be key to avoid unnecessary anxiety and anger. As teachers and professional staff, we are the most direct contact they have with the university. You also know your students best and will be able to address their specific concerns most adequately. Personal communication will help us maintain a good relation with our students and ensure their concerns and wellbeing remain central to our actions.

We have drafted a general letter with information about the upcoming boycott. You can pass this on, but also use it as a template for a more personal and tailored to the module/School message.

Slides to aid in the communication with students were circulated on ucu-announce on 20 May.

# Finance support

## 26. Can they deduct at 100%?

Whether the university can deduct and then expect the work to be mark for only 25% of the pay is legally moot. They think they can. But more importantly, if they genuinely want student's work to be marked they will have to move from that position. And they know it. Students will be even more angry at management for this attempt to intimidate staff. They think that is fine and congratulate themselves on their wellbeing arrangements. It will also seriously damage the university's reputation. We want meaningful dialogue, movement from their intransigence and resolution.

We expected the threat of punitive pay docking. We have a strategy in place to sustain this in the face of hardship. See motions at the Emergency General Meeting. Liverpool faced 100% pay docking and won. It is important to hold firm at this stage. News has come through today at



Cambridge University UCU has agreed to 'twin' offering us public, media, moral and financial solidarity. We are organising for more twins.

## 27. What financial support is available to members participating in the marking boycott?

There are funds available to provide strike pay for members who have wages deducted for taking industrial action. There are two sources of funds:

1. UCU Fighting Fund – This is a national fund which any member in good standing can apply to. Members earning less than £30,000 a year can claim an additional five days of strike pay (over and above the 11-day cap) for ASOS that attracts a 100% deduction.
2. Newcastle UCU local Hardship Fund – This is a fund established from local branch reserves to supplement the national fund.

## 28. Can I claim money from the UCU Fighting Fund or my local hardship funds for the marking boycott?

There is a National UCU fund called the [Fighting Fund](#). Guidelines state that members can access this if they are getting 100% deductions from ASOS or a marking boycott. Dispute guidance states: "Payments also apply to action short of strike where the employer has deducted a full day's pay for partial performance. In these circumstances eligibility and payments are as set out above [£50/£75 per day depending on earnings, subject to cap of 11 days]."

This guidance also states that if members are making less than £30k they can claim an additional 5 days for ASOS on top of the 11 day cap. Guidelines state: "for those earning less than £30,000 gross per annum, a claim can be made for up to five days above the present cap of 11 days for action short of strike where the employer deducts a full day's pay."

See here for more details [click here](#)

For details of how to apply see [local industrial action hardship fund](#)

## 29. How can I donate to the local hardship fund?

If you can please donate to the UCU University of Newcastle branch hardship fund by direct bank transfer to:

Unity Trust Bank, UCU Newcastle LA62, Acct: 20391236, SC: 60-83-01