

Open University Branch of the UCU

Room 015, Wilson C Block
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

Tel: 01908 653069

Email: ucu@open.ac.uk

Web: <https://ucu.open.ac.uk>

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Dear Margaret,

Thank you for your letter of 11 May with notification of the Association's poll results. We understand this is a difficult situation for students caught in the middle of a national dispute, and we welcome the chance to respond to the important issues you've raised.

The dispute over pay and conditions has been going on in various forms for several years, which means staff have already lost more than 50 days of pay for taking part in intermittent strike action. (At the Open University pay docked for industrial action goes to the Student Support Fund at UCU's request.)

No one wants to take industrial action or to be in this kind of long and bitter dispute. Workers only do this as a last resort, and give up pay as a consequence, because efforts at negotiation have failed. As with other forms of protest, however, industrial action is only effective when it is disruptive and forces attention to the issues. If one supports the right of workers to protest or to take action, as we all do in a free and open society, sometimes this will result in a significant impact.

The current industrial action, which has been going on since November 2022, was a result of a collective ballot by over 70,000 university staff in 150 universities, who recently reaffirmed the need for further action. The decision to move to a Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) rather than strike action was a national, not local, decision because of the requirement to make greater progress in securing reasonable pay and conditions for the university workforce to protect the future of the sector.

Like other universities the OU had ample warning that a Marking and Assessment Boycott was likely this summer unless genuine progress was achieved, and that this would have a significant impact on the student experience. It is therefore disappointing that the university did not seem prepared and has not made any public statement in favour of a return to national negotiation. For matters to be resolved, both sides must be interested in dialogue.

As you know this branch offered to continue to provide formative feedback on TMAs as had been done in previous boycotts but the OU declined. None of us wanted to undertake this action and now



that it has started, we want it to be concluded as quickly as possible. However, we can't continue to watch conditions deteriorate.

University staff members have lost over 25% against inflation since 2009. For an OU Associate Lecturer (spine point 33) this pay loss translates to about £9,900 and this is equivalent for other staff involved in the MAB. Other elements of the dispute are equally important to the higher education trade unions. These are sector-wide excessive and unsafe workloads, the equality pay gaps, and rampant job insecurity. We outlined this context in a piece that you kindly published to your members recently (<https://thehootstudents.com/why-are-ou-staff-taking-action/>).

Students concerned about what they are getting for their money are right to be, because the current model of education as a consumer product is failing them. Across the sector, tuition fees, which the union has always opposed, are spent on buildings, failed IT projects and leadership pay — not the staff on the ground. Because of this we, as staff, can't give students the time and attention they need and deserve. This is why the National Union of Students UK has been supportive of the industrial action despite the short-term impact on students.

We're not surprised that you are hearing from members who are worried about the effects of the MAB, since the consequences of employers ending negotiations were predictable. However, the poll only asked about the tactic of using a marking boycott, not what students think about the issues raised by UCU in this dispute. What happens to students when marking and teaching support are not paid properly? It is now normal in much of the UK higher education sector for lecturers to juggle multiple fixed-term and short-term contracts. How does that affect the quality of teaching? Will current PhD students want to become the university staff of the future in these conditions?

The Students Association sits on the governing council of the university and therefore has a voice in setting Open University policy on industrial issues. We hope that you will use that platform to demand a return to negotiations since that is the only long-term solution to the disruption faced by students.

We have previously offered to run an online Q&A for students. In February we also suggested a public debate with the Vice-Chancellor, although we understand he declined. Those offers are both still open along with any discussions you would find useful.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Caitlin Adams [by email]

Branch President, Open University UCU