

UoN UCU

Marking and Assessment Boycott FAQs (last updated 18.05)

1. What is covered by action short of a strike (ASOS)?

The following are part of our ASOS:

- working to contract
- not covering for absent colleagues
- removing uploaded materials related to, and/or not sharing materials related to, lectures or classes that will be or have been cancelled as a result of strike action
- not rescheduling lectures or classes cancelled due to strike action
- not undertaking any voluntary activities; and
- a marking and assessment boycott.

2. What is a marking and assessment boycott?

A marking and assessment boycott covers all marking and assessment processes that contribute to summative assessment decisions for students/learners, whether final (i.e. graduation/completion) or interim (i.e. progression decisions).

Once the boycott is live UCU members should cease undertaking all summative marking and associated assessment activities/duties.

What type of work is covered?

The boycott covers the marking of any and all assessed work e.g. coursework and exam marking; assessment of field work, exhibits, practical work, scientific experiments etc; invigilation of exams - all and any summative assessment.

Assessment related work e.g. processing of marks; submission of completed marking through any University administrative procedures; preparation for exam/assessment boards/meetings; attendance at exam boards/meetings. These latter activities will involve academic-related and professional services (ARPS) UCU members as well as academic staff.

What academic programmes are covered?

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 (eg in music or drama) and supervised practice (eg in teacher education). Examination of dissertations and theses at postgraduate level, as well as vivas, are included in the action.

Distinguishing between teaching and assessment

Members are asked to make a distinction between teaching (tutorial or practical) which is not subject to - or part of - any assessment boycott on the one hand and the act of assessment itself. For example,

- courses should be taught, including
- student attendance noted
- coursework, where already set, collected in.

But members should not then:

- set examinations
- invigilate examinations
- mark papers, essays or projects
- provide informal guidance to students with regard to their mark, grade or assessed progress
- process marks – including those which emanate from prior to the beginning of the assessment boycott
- attend or participate in any other way examiners' meetings.

However, if you have already entered into a contract for external examining at an institution other than the institution which is your main employer (the institution by which you are UCU member), you should carry out your obligations under this contract.

3. Does the boycott apply to both formative and summative work?

Yes, it applies to both. No feedback or grading should be given through formal channels, like Turnitin. Our goal is to apply pressure on the senior management team (SMT) of universities so that they lobby UCEA and UUK to meet our 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.

4. What are the dates for the marking assessment boycott?

Our marking and assessment boycott begins on Monday 23 May, and will continue until we get action from UCEA and UUK on national issues.

5. Is the boycott action for permanent staff only, or should hourly paid lecturers (HPLs) and PostGraduate Researchers (PGRs) take part?

To be successful this action requires a coordinated, critical mass of UCU members in each institution 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.

HPLs and PGRs directly employed by the University of Nottingham should most certainly take part. *PGRs employed via Unitemps **cannot** take part.*

Casualisation is one of the key issues in The Four Fights dispute - and the more inclusive the boycott, the stronger the leverage.

6. Is it possible/likely that UoN will deduct pay for ASOS/Marking and Assessment boycott?

The University has not yet announced whether it will deduct pay for participating in ASOS and the marking and assessment boycott.

Any threat by employers to institute punitive pay deductions to any UCU members engaged in a marking and assessment boycott will be met with the immediate threat of strike action.

Currently Goldsmiths University is deducting 20% of pay for participating in ASOS. However 100% pay deductions have been threatened at Queen Mary, where UCU are now taking strike action to revert those threats.

7. Can I claim money from the UCU fighting fund or my local hardship funds for the marking boycott?

We are still awaiting updated guidance from national UCU on this.

Previously, members could access the national UCU [Fighting Fund](#) if they are getting 100% deductions from ASOS or a marking boycott. Earlier dispute guidance stated: "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 stated 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 stated: "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."

As during previous industrial action, our branch will make the local hardship fund available for members who are experiencing financial hardship because of ASOS. The branch has previously voted to commit all its reserves to the hardship fund and we will continue to support members until those resources are exhausted. At the same time, we are working on fundraising activities and how members not taking part in the marking boycott can support those who are.

Details on what support will be available and how to apply will be finalised once the University announces what its intentions are related to pay deductions.

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

At Goldsmiths UCU, lecturers/tutors are writing 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.

9. 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?

Members who are not marking can track their hours, work to a 36.25 hour week and stop performing activities that are not in their contract: in some cases this would mean not attending recruitment 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 allows them not to participate in these activities. They may also consider donating to the local hardship fund if punitive deductions are taken from other members.

10. 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, unless the machines are members of the UCU (something for future actions perhaps). 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.

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

Many HEIs will prevent staff from referring to Industrial Action on Moodle. That said, the right to discuss strikes and boycotts - lawful action - is protected by the Human Rights Act and rights on academic freedom. Any pressure on this can be referred to your departmental rep, as it constitutes intimidation.

We have created a template for response to student complaints and are working with the Student Union to communicate with students.

It is important to emphasise to students that:

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

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

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 Turnitin or similar, 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 SMT to concede to our demands and pressure UCEA and UUK to meaningfully negotiate.

Remember that any notes entered on a work IT system can be considered University property and you could be required to submit them, for others to use. So use a private notepad if needed.

13. Is exam-setting covered by the action?

Yes.

Writing exam questions for any assessment that falls within the mandate is covered by the boycott. If the exam questions are part of a revalidation exercise for another academic year, they wouldn't be part of the boycott.

14. 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, that should be boycotted. 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.

15. Can Heads of Department ask other members of the department (not taking action) to cover the marking (either the full marking or just moderating essays marked by an academic not taking action) of members participating in the boycott?

Of course they can, and it is likely that they *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 SMT. It's not up to us to break a boycott to 'protect' others, in the same way as when we strike. If colleagues join the action it will make it stronger and give us more leverage.

16. Should colleagues who are participating in ASOS with a marking boycott write to their Heads of Department or Dean explicitly to tell them they are not setting up exams and essay questions?

Regional officials state that if members are asked directly if they are participating in ASOS, they must answer truthfully. However, members are not required to write to a Head of Department or line manager in a formal way about this.

If a blanket email goes out from HR asking people to volunteer information, you do not need to respond.

The most practical approach is that you have dialogue about this, when absolutely necessary, in the course of work activities and deadline demands. Colleagues need to be careful not to reveal to other staff or students a member's ASOS actions without the express permission of that member.

It is also worth noting that SMT cannot prove that a UCU member is participating in the marking & assessment boycott until after their marks and feedback should have been returned. In other words, don't discuss other members of your department with your Line Manager, or 'report' on members of your team.

Managers may 'guess' that someone is likely to be boycotting, but they can't assume that, or penalise them without evidence.

17. 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 SMTs 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.

18. What happens if part of your team/dept 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, SMTs may find a workaround, but that doesn't negate the action of boycotting.

19. What if your role is co-ordinator of units/teams?

You disengage from assessment and marking duties within your team. So you don't allocate marking, nor organise moderation/parity meetings and processes, nor assign roles to HPLs. You do not participate in exam boards or prepare for External Examiner(s).

20. Can we engage in partial versions where that is useful to us, like keeping our own records for further down the line?

No assessment results should be stored on any University equipment - this is technically university property, as is any completed assessment (see Mark and Park above) So any notes should be in a personal form and kept away from university platforms or equipment.

21. What happens when - as most people will be - 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.