

Executive UCU update:

The elected Executive met with Carlo Morelli and Melissa D'ascenzio, co-presidents of the Dundee University and College Union (DUCU) to discuss their perspectives on the ongoing dispute, in particular the UCU Higher Education Committees (HEC) decision to begin a marking and assessment boycott (MAB). The MAB was discussed using the boycott guide published by the UCU, linked below.

Following this meeting Carlo and Melissa were invited to speak and attend the Student Representative Council (SRC) (8) meeting which was open to all students taking place in the Ustinov Room, Bonar Hall on the 16th of May from 17:30-19:30.

Key extracts from SRC (8) have been highlighted below:

Carlo Morelli on the MAB:

'There's been a series of disputes across all the universities over the past number of years related to pay, pension and working conditions.

Workloads, casualisations and pay discrimination exists across the sector. Dundee is no different to any of this. It's culminated now with what we call a marking and assessment boycott from the middle 20th of April, which means that academic staff who are involved in marking final assessments, exams and final assessments in terms of coursework may be refusing to do that as part of the demands from the university sector to get its act together on the questions of the pay and pay discrimination, aspects of the dispute.'

Background at a local level:

'- Dundee has a gender pay gap of 16%

- If you look at things like hourly paid lectures, particularly for black men and minority staff, it's much worse at an estimate of 30%'

This looks like massive disparity between the pay that someone like myself as a white male, and someone who's a more junior staff member or woman or black member of staff, even on the same grades.'

A note on Internationalisation:

'Universities are pulling in huge numbers of international students, both their finances across the sector as a whole. We're talking about 2 billion pounds of surplus, which is being siphoned off to buildings, to high salaries to top managers and not going into student welfare, not to staff welfare, and not going into provision of education. So, all of us wherever we are in the university, whether you're a student or a staff member, are finding that conditions of learning education and the conditions of work being squeezed at the expense of the benefits of the university to generate surpluses.'

A note on Housing:

'Housing crisis students are facing that's impacting their experience. I've got students who are living in Aberdeen, students who are living in Perth, all over Scotland, and cannot get to

Dundee except by paying large amounts of transport and travel costs. So, the consequence of this is that students are being having their education suffer because of the way in which the structural inequalities exist in this and other universities.'

Carlo's experience:

'My example, I teach on a masters course, level five course, in the School of Business, that two years ago jumped up to 125 students, last year had 350 this year has 460. I don't think I've met more than two or three of those students in the whole semester. Because everything is online. Everything is so large, there isn't capacity in the University to hold classes for the students and the consequence of that is that education is being diminished. That's the reality of it.'

What happens to the assessments that have not been marked?

'We don't know what the university is going to do about those assessments that haven't been marked. In other parts of the sector, where we've heard about this, universities and talk about ignoring final marks, trying to graduate students without full credits, just using no detriment policies. As they used during COVID to ignore parts of courses they've done and then we've got marks for and trying to graduate students with degrees that they may or may not deserve. And that again, is the heart the fact that universities considered degrees as just simply a commodity. Once you've paid your fees, once you've done all the work, that's it, they want to wash their hands of it all.'

Melissa D'ascenzio's QA:

Do academic staff have to declare that they are taking part in the MAB?

'So, the official advice [from UCU] would be do not, do not engage. There's been emails that have gone out to staff and obviously we have written to HR and to the principal about this, not to solicit members to disclose whether they're taking action before they actually engage in the action. So afterwards, if they are confronted about a piece of work that they haven't done, then they will respond truthfully, and they will disclose that they haven't marked that piece of assessment because they have taken part in the marking and assessment.'

A criticism that comes up frequently is that it's unfair to students to strike because they're missing out on quality teaching time and assessment feedback. What would your response be to that?

'It comes back to what Carlo said, right? That education is seen as a commodity. And so the only way to actually get a senior management sometimes to listen is to disrupt the activity that obviously, they in a way see as the most disruptive and unfortunately, this often is teaching but I would also say that sometimes it is also the resolution of management not to listen to the union or not to engage with the unions that prolongs the strike action and is actually more damaging to students.'

We can see an example just now.

We have written to the principal to talk about possible resolutions and especially to challenge the fact that just now our members are being threatened with 100% deductions for something that is possibly less than 10% of their workload. So, losing their entire pay for to engage in action, short of a strike (ASOS).

In other universities, this threat has been reversed by talking to the unions and and union representatives and coming to an agreement that as soon as the marking and assessment boycott ends, then the marking the marks and the feedback will be returned to the student. Now that would be in the interest of the students not threatening 100% reduction and sitting on that thread without engaging with the union. So, if we're really talking about what is in the interest of the students, we are currently engaged in the marking boycott and remember that what we've been imposed a pay offer for next year. That is a 15% pay cut, which means that next year, we're going to work for free for 55 days. That is a lot, so our members are angry at this point. I think we never had to get to the point of marking and assessment boycott. If we are talking about fairness to students, the senior management team knew and universities VCs and principals knew that this was going to happen, and they have not engaged with us since January when the members in our union have rejected the pay offer. The university and college Employers Association has refused to sit down and talk to us, from January until May.

If they really cared about what was going to happen in May, they would have talked to us and they would talk to us now if they really cared about students experience and returning great marks and appropriate feedback to students.'

What has the university's response been in terms of communications in negotiations with you in terms of the marking and assessment boycott?

'So, we wrote to the principal, I think on the 28th of April, and we only heard back two or three days ago, something like that. So, that has been quite long. The email that we got back said let's find a date when we can meet and since that has been radio silence. So, we said happy to meet and try to resolve the situation as quickly as possible. There's been some lack of engagement with the senior management team throughout the whole strike process.

It's been difficult, but they do have a voice and national level because they do sit on those committees and they could come out and say, we support staff and then that in return of that kind of statement, and that kind of support. We would, of course offer a gesture of goodwill from our side.'

Melissa's closing statement:

'It's the most disappointing for us because I can assure you that none of our members want a marking and assessment boycott. We see our students; we follow them throughout their career. We want to see them succeed, we want to see them graduate we want them to go on to better things, bigger things. We don't want to withdraw marks or feedback from our students. So, it's really painful on our side, don't think that we're doing this, you know, with a light heart is really hard. We have daily meetings literally to support staff who have you

know, the difficulty of getting through and sticking to a marking an assessment boycott. It's really hard on staff as well.'

UCU Strike Action Update:

On the 5th of April the UCU announced a marking and assessment boycott (MAB) to begin on Thursday 20th of April in response to members pay, working conditions and University Superannuation Scheme (USS) pensions dispute, as decided by the UCU Higher Education Committee (HEC). This will affect 145 Universities across the UK including the University of Dundee.

Raj Jethwa, Chief Executive of UCEA, said:

“It is disheartening that UCU, through its HEC, continues to try and push its members to disrupt students. The prolonged industrial action has been isolated and low impact, so it’s disappointing that UCU is now attempting a Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) at this important time for students during the academic year.”

On the 3rd of May UCAE announced: *‘the inability for a new or revised pay increase’*, which UCU members are fighting for, because HE institutions are functioning in record deficits as summarised by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (Hesa) 2021-22 financial accounts.

What does the MAB look like?

From Thursday 20 April 2023 for a further 6 months, members of the UCU in higher education institutions which are part of the pay and working conditions dispute will:

- Halt summative marking and associated assessment activities
- Halt covering assessment-related work, e.g., exam invigilation and marking

What does this mean for you?

Any work submitted from the 20th April will not be marked by UCU members taking part in the MAB, including:

- examination marking
- coursework
- practical work
- scientific experiments
- presentations

*Excluding examination of dissertations at a postgraduate level.

What does this mean for your university staff?

UCU members recognise that the MAB disproportionately affects students but argue it is a last resort. The University of Dundee announced that partial performance of duties would not be tolerated. Therefore, members of the UCU who do take part in the marking boycott are subject to pay cuts at a rate of 1/365th for each day of partial performance of duties.

The UCU has announced a £250,000 defence fund on the 5th of May to back their members affected by pay cuts in relation to the MAB.

What can you do?

Ultimately, it is your choice, we as your students Association want to provide you with the information to make an informed decision. We highly advise that you continue to submit your assessments, coursework, and attend your exams as normal.

If you choose to stand in solidarity with your lecturers and want to take direct action, you can contact Professor Iain Gillespie, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dundee to raise your concerns and write to your local MSP to put pressure on the institutions vice-chancellor. You can use the online tools created by the UCU to [directly contact VCs](#) and [MPs](#).

More information:

Access the Boycott Guide here: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/13693/Marking-and-assessment-boycott-MAB-guidance/pdf/MAB_boycott_guide_web.pdf

For more information on this discussion please visit the recording available at 10:21- 29:00 minutes: [SRC Meeting | May 2023](#)



References:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12925/UCU-announces-250000-defence-fund-to-back-members>

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/MAB2023>

<https://www.ucea.ac.uk/news-releases/21april23/>

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12880/Marking-and-assessment-boycott-we-have-your-back>

<https://www.ucea.ac.uk/news-releases/21april23/>