



Dear Students,

You will be aware that the University and College Union (UCU) called a UK-wide marking and assessment boycott (MAB) that began on 20 April 2023. The UCU branch at QUB is involved in this action. At least thirteen academic subjects at QUB will be impacted by this action.

The boycott is an escalation of the dispute between university employees and employers over staff pay and working conditions. Staff working conditions affect your learning in substantive ways, including e.g. class sizes, module availability, and the amount of time staff have to meet with you and to give feedback on your work.

UCU's attempts to engage in meaningful dialogue with university employers have not yet led to an outcome in the industrial dispute that addresses the fundamental problems with staff pay and working conditions. A marking and assessment boycott is not undertaken lightly: it is one of the most powerful tools that staff can use to bring employers back to the table to negotiate in good faith.

During the boycott, participating staff will still be performing all of their other assigned duties, including providing support meetings with students, providing informal feedback on student work, and providing reference letters for students. Even so, senior management will withhold 50% of pay from participating Queen's staff for every day of participation in the boycott. In some cases, this will mean that staff who have only 5 assignments to mark this semester will lose 50% of their salary.

Senior management may also demand that other staff, likely those who are not specialists in the assessed areas, cover the marking for staff participating in the MAB. If they do so, university leadership will demonstrate that they are willing to risk QUB students' grades by involving members of staff who do not know what you have been taught or what the requirements for your assessments are. Such actions will undermine the value of your degrees. Based on the Frequently Asked Questions (for students) on MAB that QUB has put on its website, students will not be able to appeal marks that are assigned by exam boards that may not contain experts in the areas being assessed.

We, your instructors, academic related staff, and professional services staff, genuinely want to continue to put the interests of students first, as we have tried to do throughout this dispute. We would much prefer that employers had made a reasonable offer on pay and conditions that reflected not only the current cost of living crisis, but also the impact of over a decade of real terms pay cuts, unsafe workloads, and increased use of fixed term and casualised contracts. When all other measures to get employers to negotiate in good faith fail, the pressure of a marking and assessment boycott is frequently the only thing that will bring employers back to the negotiating table. At 18 of 20 universities that undertook a MAB last summer, the vice chancellor quickly

reached local agreements with UCU to end the MAB before students were seriously disrupted. This is the preferred outcome of UCU QUB members for summer 2023 also. We hope that the MAB will be ended by the QUB VC and his 144 colleagues. They can do so by making an improved offer to UCU.

We want to provide you transparency about what is happening and outline here:

1. How a boycott can affect you, as students
2. How we, as staff, will continue to support you
3. What is in your power to shape what happens at QUB

### **1. How a boycott can affect students**

- Staff who are participating in the MAB will not release marks in Canvas. This is a DELAY, not a cancellation. Your marks will be assessed and released when our employer joins in negotiations in good faith and makes a reasonable offer.
- The MAB covers a wide variety of assessment related activities. It includes not marking final exams and essays, not marking dissertations, not holding exams or resit exams, and not moderating.
- Staff will not participate in exam boards necessary for ratifying your marks and, therefore, your degree.
- This may delay graduation.

### **2. How staff will continue to support students**

- We will support students taking up offers for postgraduate study. If Admissions Offices require assurance that you have attained the required grade, we can assure them. If proof of final assessment submission is required, we can provide that proof. The UK Higher Education sector knows that disruptions because of the dispute have affected students; they will be understanding, and we will be communicative.
- We will support students in job applications, writing references and indicating past and project performance. You can email your lecturers, tutors, advisors, and administrative support teams for letters of reference, transcripts, and so forth.
- International students on time-sensitive visas will be fully supported. The Queen's University International Office is aware of the industrial action and can communicate that to the relevant authorities. If you have a live presentation or exam and your session is cancelled because of the MAB, ensure that you advise the administrative support team that your absence from that session was due to industrial action. Legally, this will not count against your maximum allowable absences.
- This is a MARKING boycott, not a learning boycott. Your lecturers can provide informal feedback on assessments to support students preparing for final assignments.

### **3. What is in your power**

Help us to help students! Students can change the direction of this dispute. The university leadership is choosing not to limit the disruption that you are experiencing. You can convince managers to listen to the needs of staff and students to ensure that Queen's becomes a fairer working and learning environment. To that end, there is a practical thing that students can do:

- Write to the Vice Chancellor, Professor Ian Greer, and demand that the University negotiate in good faith with staff, and make public representation to

UCEA, the employers' representative body, that UCEA work to resolve the dispute by making an acceptable pay and conditions offer to UCU members: [vc.pa@qub.ac.uk](mailto:vc.pa@qub.ac.uk)

### **Final thoughts**

- The UK Higher Education sector is collapsing. UCU wants a better deal for students and staff. It is well-documented that threats of marking and assessment boycotts can bring Vice Chancellors to the table when nothing else will (one example is Ulster UCU's MAB last summer). When students unite with staff in demanding better learning and working conditions, we have a real chance at meaningful change.
- Reach out to any UCU member to express your concerns and to find out more about how you can use your voice as a powerful tool for change.
- You can also contact the Queen's branch of UCU here: [ucu-officers@qub.ac.uk](mailto:ucu-officers@qub.ac.uk)

Yours sincerely,

UCU QUB officers