



York St John University branch

Branch email: ucugen@yorksja.ac.uk

Branch Chair: Robert Avery

Branch Secretary: Suzy Fitzpatrick

Dear Student,

The University and College Union (UCU) branch of York St John University would like to provide you with an update to the Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB), part of nationally coordinated industrial action that is affecting most universities in the UK at the present time. Your grades may be affected by this boycott. Firstly, every member of staff participating in the boycott understands the uncertainty, anxiety and difficulty that students may be experiencing as a result of the action, and has considered its potential impacts extremely carefully. It is not comfortable or easy for any of us to risk the dispute impacting our students by causing delays to marks and other uncertainties about progression, study abroad plans or visas, and accordingly we hope our employers will agree to return to negotiations as soon as possible. If you would like to discuss any aspect of this dispute with members of the UCU Branch Committee, to pledge your solidarity or to ask questions, please use the email at the top of the page.

We hope this letter goes some way to providing information and transparency the University has not afforded you, particularly around what you need to be aware of as to how your work may have been assessed in the absence of module leaders. We apologise that we cannot give answers to all of the questions we know our students will have; this dispute involves two sides: the lecturing staff represented by Universities and College Union and the employer, York St John University's Executive Board, represented by the University and College Employers Association (UCEA). The outcomes of the current dispute do not sit with the decisions of lecturing staff alone to decide. As students, you deserve to know as much information as we are able to provide, and are grateful to the Student Union for allowing us to share this with you.

Why is there a Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) nationally?

Industrial action has been a last resort for staff. The national dispute has four fights: workload, precarious contracts, equality gaps and pay. **Workload:** over the last five to ten years restructuring has reduced staffing in several areas and increased workloads. Staff are working far beyond contracted hours to ensure the quality of your teaching and feedback. **Precarity:** approximately 40% of teaching staff in higher education are on hourly paid contracts, often temporary ones, which means they cannot guarantee an income to pay for housing, bills and food. **Equality gaps:** on average female staff, Black and Asian staff, and staff with disabilities earn less than able-bodied White men with similar qualifications and achievements. **Pay:** since 2008 pay settlements have been below inflation and have, therefore, been real terms pay cuts, and that's before the current cost of living crisis. The UCU called several strike days and the MAB in the hope that employers would discuss realistic solutions to these four fights. We have been forced into this action through years of the UCEA not making sufficient progress on these fights.

If my lecturer participates in this boycott, who marks my work?

Rather than resuming talks to resolve the dispute, University managers have advised Heads of School and Associate Heads to embark on the labour-intensive job of implementing varied processes of 'mitigation' and we are deeply concerned about these proposed measures and their impact on students. Where the module leader participates in the boycott, this may result in your work not being marked until July or even August. The priority for the University is to mark work of those graduating this year. Much of this work may not have been delayed to any significant degree. Of greater concern to you however is HOW your work has been, or will be marked.

We are aware of the following concerning mitigation practices:

- Some work has been marked by a member of staff with a different specialism than the subject area covered in the work they are marking - including dissertations.
- Some work has been marked by staff who were not even an employee of York St John, but have been brought in on an hourly rate to mark work they have no prior knowledge of.
- Some line managers have taken the work of multiple boycotters so their own marking load reaches 100s of scripts rather than the tens they normally mark.

You have every right to know the detail of how your work has been marked during this period. Rather than being assured that "suitable mitigation measures are in place", demand to know the details. How are these mitigation measures meeting the requirements enshrined in the University's Code of Practice on Assessment. Has a mark you have received been inconsistent with your previous marks? Has feedback been unusually generic or brief? If you are still waiting for marks, ask your Associate

Heads and Heads of School for a time scale. If you have received marks, be aware of the following:

1. A sample of work across all grades should be moderated by a second member of staff to ensure fairness and overall consistent approach - **has this happened with your work?**
2. When two or more people on a marking team mark together for the first time, they do a calibration exercise where they all mark several of the same submission to compare marks before they embark on marking the rest of the marking load - **has this happened with your work?**
3. The Code of Practice on Assessment says “if at least one specialist marker cannot be found, identify a substitute to mark the assessment as pass/fail so that credit can be awarded for the work.” **Has your work been marked by a non-specialist, but have they given you a numerical grade rather than a pass or fail? Ask why they have gone against the Code of Practice in this case.**

Some of the mitigation measures in place will likely lead to marks that do not reflect your efforts and accomplishments this semester; furthermore, this could reduce the quality of your degree, diploma, or certificate. You deserve better. Your education has already been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, during which time mitigation was absolutely necessary. Staff worked hard to maintain the quality and standard of education at YSJ during the pandemic, and while some assessment tasks were adjusted, assessments were marked by staff. Thus, Covid mitigation was fundamentally different from the current one: staff input was vital to the success of Covid-19 mitigation; **current ‘mitigation’ proposals are based around ignoring staff input.**

When will this dispute end? Who can bring that about?

University managers can take material steps to help national negotiations resume. This is a national dispute, to bring overdue and significant improvements to the entire Higher Education sector. The role of the Vice Chancellor and the Executive Board of this University is, however, of vital importance, as are the Vice Chancellors and Executive Boards of every other university in the UK. Our Vice Chancellor is currently chair of an umbrella group called Yorkshire Universities. She is chairing a forum which brings together some of northern England’s largest universities. She could be using that position to appeal to all the other VCs of Yorkshire Universities to act in concert to put pressure on UCEA to agree to make some substantial progress on the four fights we mentioned earlier. She could have taken up our branch’s invitation to draft a joint public statement with York St John UCU branch to state that, for the good of staff and students everywhere, movement on the four fights is absolutely crucial. Instead, we have seen a level of apathy, and even ignorance, as to what the Four

Fights actually are, and how improving them would enhance students' learning experience ten fold.

You have a lot of power here too. Sign the [#SettleTheDispute: An Open Letter to the Executive Board of York St John University \(office.com\)](#) This is an open letter written by YSJ students.

- Write to your own Dean/Head of School demanding answers on the above 'mitigation' measures for marking and its impact on your marks.
- Email the VC, Professor Karen Bryan k.bryan@yorks.ac.uk raising concerns about the punitive and disproportionate deductions to staff pay and urging her to take the steps available to her to help settle the dispute.

What is the impact on staff of this dispute?

We have seen an aggressive turn towards marketisation of Higher Education, particularly since the inflated student fee structures came into play in 2010. We have seen Vice Chancellors and Executive Board salaries ballooning and 6 figure salaries for senior management are now viewed as completely legitimate and normal, as is the case at York St John. This has left senior managers adrift from the day to day problems facing teaching staff particularly around **the on-average extra day a week we are putting in unpaid** to keep up with the demands of teaching growing student numbers, in under-staffed departments. Be reassured that your lecturers/tutors are committed to providing you with a quality education, we always have been. But the VC and Executive Board are simply unaware of the excessive workload issues and the unmanageably low pay of some of our casualised staff. Instead they have congratulated themselves for awarding a not-in-line-with-inflation 5% pay increase after 15 years of a real terms pay cuts, and without looking at the excessive workload question in tandem with that pay increase.

Staff do not want to strike or to take part in the MAB. However, their working conditions are your learning conditions, and current conditions are not sustainable. Hence, UCU members feel obligated to engage in lawful industrial action. Their commitment to secure an improved higher education for everyone is coming at a devastating financial cost to them and their families. On strike days, staff lose 100% of their pay. During the MAB, staff continue to carry out every other expectation of their contract including lectures, seminars, tutorials, answering emails, preparation and planning, giving formative feedback, participating in meetings and conferences etc - and yet they are losing a substantial amount of pay for an extended period. **YSJ has stated that it will deduct 100% of pay, and make a 50% *ex gratia* (gift) payment from 20th April until 30th September.** Such extensive deductions are designed to be entirely punitive and have put some of our staff with 14 years teaching experience in a situation where in June, their hourly rate has been reduced to between £3 and £4

an hour! This is while they continue to fulfill 97% of their workload. These deductions are wildly disproportionate: academic staff at York St John are allocated 15 days for marking summative assignments. Although YSJ managers claim they are required to make these deductions, **the amount that they deduct could be more proportionate**; for example, Ulster University has not imposed any deductions; the University of Hertfordshire and Queen Margaret University, both post-92s and of a similar size to YSJ, have rescinded the threat of deductions; King's College London, a world-renowned university, has reduced its threat of 50% deductions from 20 days to 10 days (i.e. a maximum of 5 days of salary); University of Warwick will only deduct 25% of pay from the time that would have been spent marking.

Thank you for reading this letter. We sincerely hope that together, staff and students of York St John can help settle this dispute, and come out with a fairer workplace/ learning environment for all staff and students in higher education.

In solidarity,
UCU Branch Committee