

Raj Jethwa  
UCEA  
Via e-mail

02 August 2023

Dear Raj

I write to you following your letter dated 31 July, which was sent after UCEA agreed to send dates last week for an urgent meeting and then failed to do so.

You note in your letter that UCEA and UCU with the UNISON joint secretary observer have had three meetings to explore the issues I set out in my letter on 30 June. Whilst we felt that the first meeting was constructive, with UCEA indicating a genuine willingness to address the issues raised, it has since become clear that UCEA had no intention of reaching an interim agreement that would allow us to suspend the marking and assessment boycott.

UCU made it clear at the beginning of our last meeting on 27 July that if the terms set out in UCEA's document which you have repeated in your latest letter were UCEA's final position there was little benefit to continuing the meeting. UCEA representatives, including yourself, insisted that you were open to exploring forms of redress and that the meeting should go ahead. The meeting was concluded with UCEA agreeing to reconsider your position and provide urgent dates for a fourth and final meeting.

During these meetings UCU repeatedly set out the issues facing international students on Tier 4 visas, and the need to prioritise students who are particularly impacted by the dispute. We also outlined specific concerns of final year students, postgraduate students, and others across the sector who needed and deserved a resolution of this dispute, or at the very least an interim agreement allowing us to suspend the boycott. We came prepared to reach a compromise and negotiate in good faith for the benefit of staff, students, and the sector as a whole. It is clear from your correspondence and 'offer' that UCEA had no such intention. Your letter reflects much of what is wrong with a sector where employers have demonstrated disregard and, in too many cases, outright disdain for the staff who work so hard to keep the sector afloat. That UCEA has doubled down on its position that staff who have continued to otherwise fulfil their contractual duties except for marking and assessment deserve continued punishment and hardship shows our members exactly what the sector's leadership thinks of them.

At a time when staff in comparable professions across the compulsory education, health, and other sectors are presented with higher pay uplifts in sectors that have been chronically underfunded, and have stood down action as a result, UCEA's repeated complaints of affordability and refusal to reconsider its offer ring increasingly hollow.

UCU entered these talks with optimism that we could de-escalate the dispute and eventually reach a resolution. The UCU negotiators and I put forward multiple pathways to a resolution, but UCEA rejected every single one, often without a clear rationale for doing so other than that relieving the disproportionate financial pain felt by staff was not an option. We have made ourselves available to meet on numerous days whilst UCEA dithered about availability, pushing meetings into the long grass, and finally failing to even offer dates for the latest meeting.

It is now clear that there was never any serious intention to consider an interim agreement, let alone seriously addressing the wider issues of the dispute. UCEA has made it clear that improving industrial relations, the future of students, and the health, safety and wellbeing of staff are not your priorities – instead it feels as though they are seen as an obstacle to crushing staff morale.

UCU came with solutions and a willingness to work jointly for the sake of the sector. UCEA returned with even more punitive pre-conditions to talks and no plan for the future of higher education.

You have asked whether UCEA's punitive terms provide a basis for reconvening the adjourned meeting. UCEA must surely know that your terms render any discussions impossible for you have once again already unilaterally dictated the outcome of what are supposed to be joint talks between two parties. Our members will recognise this.

Our door remains open for talks as it has always been, and that includes for the final meeting to seek an interim agreement to suspend the MAB. If UCEA's position remains that the terms set out in your letter are your final position, I would be grateful if UCEA could confirm this in writing as you will appreciate there is no value in a meeting where one side refuses to even consider a compromise.

Be under no illusions – the issues under dispute are of prime importance to our members and we know they will support a rebalot if you are unwilling to compromise. There is still time to avert this long-running dispute continuing into the next academic year – the ball remains in your court.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dr Jo Grady  
General Secretary