

Jon Hegerty and Ruth Smith
Joint Union Side Secretaries
Joint Higher Education Sector Trade Unions

By email

19 May 2023

Dear Jon and Ruth,

2023-24 New JNCHES pay round

Thank you for your separate letters of 18 May 2023.

At the outset, I would like to reiterate that UCEA is committed to national negotiations. We have repeatedly stated that we are more than willing to continue with talks to discuss the important issues of workload, contract types and pay gaps as part of Phase Two of the 2023-24 New JNCHES negotiating round. However, as you know, this will only be possible if there is no industrial action during the talks. We hope the trade unions recognise that protecting the learning and education of our students is not a precondition, it is a fundamental duty.

I would like to reiterate that our members genuinely understand the anxieties facing staff as inflation pushes up the price of food, energy and everyday necessities. This is why UCEA proposed an early start to pay negotiations for 2023-24 – to provide support to staff through the current cost of living pressures. The pay uplift from 1 August 2023 will be a minimum of 5 percent for all and as much as 8 percent for some groups of staff. Almost half of this increase was applied to salaries six months earlier than normal, helping colleagues as soon as possible and strongly weighted towards those on the lowest pay points. This is in addition to the 2-3 percent incremental pay progression that over half the staff in the sector receive.

This is set against the following context. Student tuition fees in England have been frozen until at least 2025-26, the Welsh Government Budget shows a cut to higher education funding for 2023-24, the Scottish Government has recently announced a £20m reduction to the amount promised in its draft Budget, and in Northern Ireland the Department for the Economy's budget for further and higher education could be cut by almost 20 percent in 2023-24 and tuition fees may rise. Many HE institutions are also facing substantial increases in employer contributions in the Teachers' Pension Scheme.

The pay uplift is at a level which, therefore, many employers will find financially challenging. Despite the financial pressures facing the sector, employers implemented the 2023-24 pay award which was comparable to settlements in other sectors.

In an attempt to reach an agreement with the Joint HE Trade Unions, UCEA entered into the Acas collective conciliation process. In those talks we made concrete proposals in relation to the reform of the pay spine; the disability, ethnicity and gender pay gaps; workload, and contract types. These proposals were renegotiated and adjusted by employers repeatedly until the union negotiators, including UCU, were satisfied with them. It was, therefore, disappointing that UCU's higher education committee then undermined weeks of constructive joint work by recommending that members reject those proposals, which the members then did in a consultative online ballot.

It is still more disappointing that UCU has begun a marking and assessment boycott targeting students' learning and education and their future career prospects. HEIs have a duty to protect students and so must withhold pay for partial performance. It is wrong of UCU to suggest that withholding of pay is in any sense punitive, given the extremely damaging nature of a marking and assessment boycott on students. At the same time, the unions should not mislead your members by suggesting that the marking and assessment boycott or further industrial action could lead to a revised pay for 2023-24; given the current financial situation there is no possibility of this happening.

We remain committed to working with the sector's trade unions, and urge the unions to call off your industrial action and to return to talks with the employers on matters relating to workload, contract types and pay gaps, all of which are issues that employers in the sector would like to continue to make progress.

Given that you have asked, in the Joint Unions' letter dated 18 May, that we arrange meetings to discuss the above important issues, I would be grateful if you could clarify whether you have now accepted the Acas Terms of Reference as the basis of the those talks.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Raj Jethwa". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal stroke.

Raj Jethwa
Chief Executive

cc Greg Barnett, UCU
Shahenda Suliman, UCU