



**University College London UCU Branch**

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Dr Michael Spence AC  
Provost and President

Thursday, 4 May 2023

Victor Chu CBE  
Chair of Council  
University College London  
London

Dear Provost and Chair of Council

I am writing formally to ask if you would share this letter and our letter to the Provost dated 21 April (enclosed) with members of UCL Council ahead of your meeting this Friday.

We believe that UCL's proposed deductions for staff choosing to participate in the Marking and Assessment Boycott is not compliant with well-understood legal principles, as summarised therein. Moreover, UCL appears to have positioned itself as an outlier in its plans for making deductions for a fixed period of 10.4 weeks. During this time, UCL expects staff to be carrying out all other duties normally. For most staff this means an over-deduction several times over their actual marking workload.

We believe that there are well-understood legal principles regarding deductions from pay, but crucially they must be particularized in each and every single case. Thus many universities are applying deductions from the date at which marks become overdue until they are no longer necessary, i.e. from the point in time when a contractual breach arises to the point when it no longer is in effect. As a result, King's and Brunel are signaling they expect deductions to last for some 10 days, Salford 15 days, and so on.

By contrast UCL is proposing a flat rate of 10 *weeks*.

Leaving aside the legal ramifications of UCL's approach, we must object that UCL's current policy is extremely damaging for the University's public reputation for fairness. It is also hugely undermining to employment relations within UCL. Staff are rightly angry and upset that some in UCL senior management feel that it is acceptable to make such extreme threats to their income, particularly in a cost-of-living crisis. Staff who initially did not wish to participate in the marking boycott increasingly say they believe that participation is becoming a matter of principle.

At our meeting with them on Wednesday, HR told trade unions that UCL's intention is not to be punitive, and they respect the right of staff to freely participate and withdraw their labour. However, UCL appears to have substantially overestimated both the scale and type of duties that are covered by the boycott call, which is limited to the process of marking summative

assessments only (the Academic Manual defines them as ‘formal assessments where your results count towards your degree’). The extent to which staff have duties in this process varies very widely, from extensive marking for some through to occasional duties for others. In some cases marking student work is a voluntary activity. Yet UCL proposes to treat each of these cases identically.

More than 3,500 union members at UCL stand with us. In the last rebalot, 90% of members nationally voted for action short of strike, which explicitly mentioned a Marking and Assessment Boycott. If members face disproportionate deductions for boycotting marking, then the union obviously has alternative options. We expect members to push for strike action and escalate the dispute (we have already had one members’ meeting where this was agreed). We call upon UMC to avert this outcome by changing UCL’s position.

We are aware that colleagues are also taking this matter to Academic Board. We are asking Council to intervene in the interests of all members of College.

No member of staff takes industrial action lightly. No-one who teaches is indifferent to our students. Indeed, as I write, we are all engaged in formative assessment, tutorials and support as normal.

We ask that members of Council recognize we are reluctantly boycotting but are determined to support our colleagues even as we support our students. We urge Council to take this matter seriously and hope that wise heads will prevail.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Wallis', written in a cursive style.

Sean Wallis  
UCL UCU Branch President

Enc: Letter to Provost, 21 April 2023