

Report March 2025

Marking and assessment boycotts

Introduction

Between April and November 2023, as part of industrial action over pay, working conditions and pensions, many teaching staff in England who were members of the University and College Union took part in a boycott of marking and assessment activities. The scale of this is difficult to measure exactly, but the Universities and Colleges Employers Association, which was in dispute with the union, estimated that 30,000 students were unable to graduate on time or were affected in some other way.¹

While some students report having positive experiences of how their institutions handled the marking and assessment boycott, we know it negatively affected some groups of students in particular, for instance those in their final year. We have heard that some students experienced delays in receiving marks for assessments, and in some cases did not get marks back at all, which could potentially affect their progress into employment or further study. International students were also notably affected, as delays in receiving academic feedback or qualifications caused uncertainty about visas and visa applications.²

The Office for Students is the independent regulator for higher education in England. We ensure that students from all backgrounds benefit from high quality higher education, delivered by a diverse, sustainable sector that continues to improve. As financial pressures bring change to the higher education sector, it is important that we identify students' interests and place them at the centre of our work.

This student insight report presents what we know, from engagement with students and other sources, about the impact of a marking and assessment boycott carried out by university and college teaching staff in 2023 and the steps taken by universities and colleges to mitigate disruption.

The Office for Students (OfS) has an important role in ensuring that students receive high quality higher education. This perhaps applies more than ever during exams and other periods of assessment, because of the importance of well designed and robust assessment to support students' learning and to ensure the qualifications universities award are credible. We were therefore interested in understanding how the 2023 boycott affected students.

To achieve this we commissioned our own research, in two phases. We also examined existing sources of information.

First, we commissioned YouGov to run an online text-based focus group in July 2024. The sample of 11 participants included a mix of current higher education students who were at university during the 2023 boycott and graduates who were in their final year at the time. All participants were at universities affected by the boycott. The focus group explored the short-term and long-term impacts of the boycott, the information students received from their institutions, and their views on the responses of those institutions during that time. We have included analysis and quotes from the focus group in this report.

We then commissioned a quantitative survey, using YouGov's online panel. Fieldwork was carried out in August 2024. In total, 763 responses were collected across three respondent groups – 279 undergraduate students, 284 postgraduate students and 200 graduates – all of whom were studying at an affected institution at the time of the marking and assessment boycott.³ This poll further explored the impact of the industrial action on the students' academic experiences and longer-term considerations, the communications students received from their universities during the boycott, and their perceptions of students' rights.⁴ We give some statistical findings in this publication.⁵ You can find more details about the results and methods of the survey in the YouGov report published on our website.⁶

We are publishing this report to share some of the insight we gained, and to help universities and colleges understand how students were affected and how they can ensure that the interests of students are prioritised and protected during any future industrial action. Anonymous quotes from students and graduates who participated in the focus group appear throughout. While our research focused solely on the 2023 marking and assessment boycott, the points made by students are often also relevant to other types of industrial action.

Definition

A **marking and assessment boycott** is a form of industrial action where union members in higher education settings stop marking and assessment activities. This can include setting and invigilating exams, marking coursework, performances and dissertations, and any other activities that may contribute to summative assessment decisions.

In this report, **the boycott** refers to the University and College Union's marking and assessment boycott of April to November 2023.

What students have told us

Summary

- Of those survey respondents affected by the boycott, about a third were satisfied with how it was handled by their institution and around half were dissatisfied.
- Just under half of survey respondents affected by the boycott reported being offered some kind of alternative or compensation; nearly as many said they weren't offered anything.
- Just under a third of those survey respondents whose course was affected by the boycott were aware of their right to request financial compensation.
- During the boycott many students experienced stress and worse mental health.
- Some students experienced delays in receiving feedback, in some cases including delayed graduation or receiving lower degree classifications than they believed they would have otherwise.

Institutional responses

Of those survey respondents whose course was affected by the boycott, 36 per cent were satisfied with how the boycott was handled by their institution and 54 per cent were dissatisfied.

Students' reactions to institutional responses in our research were mixed. Out of all survey respondents, half (50 per cent) agreed that their institution was working in the best interests of its students, and around a quarter (24 per cent) disagreed. Of those survey respondents affected by the boycott, more reported being dissatisfied (54 per cent) than satisfied (36 per cent) with how it was handled by their institution.

Some focus group participants talked of their negative perceptions of their higher education experience, and a belief that degrees gained during this period might be of lesser value.

Focus group participants, especially those who studied on practical courses, said that the boycott had resulted in a reduction in teaching and assessment, and they worried this would affect their future employment, knowledge and skills. It is perhaps surprising that a marking and assessment boycott would impact teaching. Although it was clear in our research design and questions that we were referring to April to November 2023, we cannot rule out that some students may have been thinking of other instances of industrial action.

Some focus group participants acknowledged that the topics affected had been removed from their exams, but they felt that not covering these elements meant that their degree could be worth less than it would be otherwise. Some in the focus group noted the flexibility of staff to work around the disruption, particularly for the benefit of final year students, offering additional resources or more support on the days when they weren't taking part in industrial action.

“ I wasn't taught large chunks (up to 50 per cent) of some modules due to strikes, and then those weren't in the exams, and then the exams weren't marked. So I am less educated than my peers who did the same programme five years beforehand. ”

“ My supervisors were great as they made themselves available more on days that they worked. ”

Focus group participants

Communication

Survey respondents reported that email, either institution-wide or subject-wide, was the most common way of communicating information and updates about the boycott to students and graduates. 65 per cent of all respondents had been communicated with in this way. Those respondents who had received communication about the boycott from their institution tended to be satisfied with this communication, with satisfaction rates varying by source of communication. Information from lecturers and staff was most positively rated (78 per cent net satisfied), followed by information from a students' union (74 per cent) and from the university as a whole (64 per cent).

Some students in the focus group felt that they had received timely and regular communication by email from their institutions, including dates of when the

boycott would begin, dates of talks with trade unions and advice on how to access wellbeing support services. However, others weren't satisfied with the information they received. They said that it was sporadic, that it lacked detail or any acknowledgement of the personal implications of the boycott for students, and that it gave them the impression that the institution did not have the information available to share. Students wanted clearer timelines and a better understanding of the measures their institution was taking. They also wanted more personalised communication, as opposed to generic emails.

Many students in the focus group were not told which of their modules would be affected, or when they would get their marks and feedback. Sometimes lecturers offered this information directly, but it was not included in institutional communications. Information from universities often did not mention what they would be doing to support students during the boycott, which led to greater uncertainty and stress. Students were often aware that during the pandemic their institution had operated 'no detriment' policies, but most were not aware of whether these were also implemented in response to the marking and assessment boycott.

“ I think everyone was in a tight spot regarding the boycott and the uni communicated well and the feedback, when it came, was still up to the usual standard. ”

“ I got the bare minimum – we were told there would be a marking strike but that they couldn't tell us which modules would be affected, and they signposted us to the mental health support team. ”

“ I was disappointed, but it gave me a better perspective on what it's like for the staff who work at UK universities. ”

“ I guess knowing how long it is going to last would have been helpful but maybe not possible. ”

Focus group participants

Impact on students

53 per cent of survey respondents whose course had been affected by the boycott reported that their coursework was either not marked or marks were delayed; 46 per cent stated their exams were not marked or marks were delayed.

41 per cent of survey respondents reported that the boycott had negatively affected their stress levels.

30 per cent of those survey respondents whose course was affected by the boycott were aware of their right to request financial compensation.

Of those affected by the boycott, 46 per cent reported that they were offered some kind of alternative or compensation; 43 per cent stated they weren't offered anything.

Generally, the students involved in the focus group supported their lecturers' right to take industrial action, and felt that their universities should be responsible for the impact this had on them as students. Many hoped that their institution would work to address the root causes of the dispute, and ensure that the quality of education promised to students was maintained, even under challenging circumstances.

The majority of students and graduates responding to the survey (52 per cent) reported that their course was affected by the marking and assessment boycott at their institution in 2023. Postgraduate students were less likely to say this (43 per cent compared with 57 per cent for both undergraduate students and graduates).

The boycott had a range of impacts on students. In the focus group, some reported experiencing schedule changes, lecture cancellations, reduced contact hours with lecturers, and delays in getting their grades and feedback. Students in the focus group also told us that they missed out on parts of their syllabus because their lectures were frequently rescheduled, cancelled or moved online.

Assessment

Over half (53 per cent) of respondents to the survey whose course had been affected by the boycott reported that their coursework was either not marked or that marking was delayed; 46 per cent stated their exams were not marked or results were delayed. Some focus group participants had waited for a long time to receive their grades, with a potential impact on their degree classification or decisions about their continuing studies. This in turn led to knock-on effects, such as not having the necessary information to choose their modules for the following year, or reductions in their final grades because modules had been automatically passed with the minimum pass mark rather than being marked with higher marks being used to calculate classifications.

“ I was waiting for the result of a resit that the progression of my masters' depended upon but it was delayed so much I had to pay for the next module and would not get the results until halfway through. ”

“ I sat my second-year exams in May and I had to wait until October the next academic year to get the results [...] So we had to pick next year's modules not knowing if we passed the previous year's exams. ”

“ Only one of my four exams had been marked, so three of them were automatically passed, but I don't know if I would have got a 50 per cent pass or an 80 per cent distinction had they been marked, and they were big enough components to affect my overall classification [...] I had been on track for a distinction and came out with a merit. ”

Focus group participants

Mental health

Wider reported effects of the boycott included stress and worsening mental health. Respondents to the survey most commonly reported that it had negatively affected their stress levels (41 per cent), followed by their mental health (32 per cent) and their social life (15 per cent).

Some students in the focus group reported finding the approach to grading demoralising, as they didn't know whether their assessments would be marked, and whether their grade would reflect their efforts. A few students ended up deferring for a year as a result. Others were frustrated with how their university handled the situation, and felt that they were not getting the standard of education they paid for. A few mentioned that the delays in getting their results meant that they had not been able to attend their graduation ceremony.

“ [I felt] a lot of anxiety about exam results. ”

“ I was a lot more stressed and didn't know if I'd be passing or resitting [...] and also didn't manage to get graduation tickets in time due to how late results were, so I didn't have a graduation ceremony. ”

“ It was really stressful but I empathised with my lecturers. ”

Focus group participants

Quality of education

Just over a third (38 per cent) of survey respondents (regardless of whether they were personally affected) felt that the quality of their education decreased as a result of the boycott, and 41 per cent believed that their degree's value for money had decreased.

Most students in the focus group did not feel that their overall degree, or the next steps in their career, had been affected. However, some of those who identified a long-term impact believed that their eventual grade or qualification was lower than it would have been without the boycott, or that their applications for postgraduate study had been weakened.

“ I ended up with a [postgraduate diploma] instead of my MSc, and I came out with a merit instead of a distinction. ”

“ The delayed marks meant that I couldn't state exactly what my final grade would be for my masters' application. ”

Focus group participants

Many students in the focus group said the boycott hadn't significantly changed how they felt about their degrees overall, and were clear that they would not have made different choices if they had anticipated the boycott.

For some focus group participants, though, the experience reduced their overall trust in their university, and a few reported that it had contributed to a decision not to pursue postgraduate studies, or not to work in the higher education sector. In the survey responses, 42 per cent reported that the boycott had decreased their trust in their university (although 13 per cent reported that it had increased trust).

“ I am still going. I just started my thesis this week. Overall, I am happy with my masters’ despite more than a few hurdles and issues along the way. ”

“ I still really enjoyed university and would go back and do the degree again. But I feel like there is much to be improved.’ ”

“ It does make me distrust the university management structure and its ability to work in the best interests of students rather than as a private business for profit. ”

“ I have graduated – no prospects were affected. However, I would not study for another degree as I feel the value is greatly diminished. ”

Focus group participants

Students in the focus group felt that they should have the right to high quality education, access to the resources necessary for their learning and the educational experience they paid for. They felt that promises had not been met in terms of timely feedback, fair assessment, quality teaching and access to academic resources.

Financial compensation and other forms of redress

Only 30 per cent of those survey respondents whose course was affected by the boycott said they were aware of their right to request financial compensation. Most students in the focus group were not aware that their rights were protected by consumer protection law (the legal framework that grants rights to consumers and seeks to protect these rights), and in many cases, reported that their universities did not communicate clearly with them during the boycott about their rights to redress or compensation.⁷

The survey asked those students who had reported that their course was affected by the marking and assessment boycott whether the university had provided any alternatives or compensation. Among this group, just under half (46 per cent) reported that they were offered some kind of alternative or compensation; 43 per cent stated they weren’t offered anything. Of those whose course was affected by the boycott, 9 per cent requested and received financial compensation, while 6 per cent requested it and did not receive it. 2 per cent had requested it, but the process was still ongoing at time of the survey.

The most common type of alternative or compensation (as mentioned by, though not necessarily extended to, 26 per cent of respondents) was to apply ‘no detriment’ policies to ensure students weren’t unfairly disadvantaged because some of their work had not been marked.

“ When we pay so much to be there (and are in debt for years afterwards) and are expected to work so hard and meet deadlines, it was frustrating that we couldn’t get them to offer the product we have bought!”

“ They treat students as customers rather than students so therefore those rights should apply, or refunds [be] given. ”

Focus group participants

What else we know about the impact of the boycott

The 2023 marking and assessment boycott was the subject of an Education Select Committee inquiry.⁸ Evidence was given at a committee hearing in February 2024, and also through written submissions, focusing on the impact of the industrial action on university students. Respondents included students, students’ unions from multiple universities, the National Union of Students, trade unions, higher education representative bodies and the OfS.

The committee heard evidence that the greatest impact of the boycott fell on vulnerable student groups, final year students, international students, and those on courses such as social work that require professional accreditation.

In November 2023, under the previous government, the Department for Education began a consultation about introducing a minimum service level for education.⁹ This looked at the impact of the 2023 marking and assessment boycott across student groups, and at which of the measures adopted by universities and colleges were most successful in mitigating this. Respondents from universities and colleges reported a number of mitigations, including withholding all pay from staff taking industrial action, bringing in alternative markers for exams, relaxing their regulations for marking and assessment, and prioritising protecting final year students.¹⁰

In its submission, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education reported receiving a small number of complaints about the impact of the boycott on student progression, and reported that mitigating action had varied greatly between institutions.¹¹

What universities and colleges told us

On the basis of the reportable events submitted to us by some of the institutions involved, the impact of the boycott varied significantly from one institution to another. Many institutions reported that no or few students were affected, and that timely support had been given to those who were. In others, large-scale mitigations had to be put in place to address the impact on whole courses or student groups. A third group found mitigations difficult to implement for various reasons, including a lack of flexibility in assessment regulations, lack of resources, and tightness of timing.

In 2023, 26 institutions notified the OfS that industrial action might affect their ability to deliver fully classified degrees on time. Around half of these 26 institutions reported specific mitigations they would be putting in place, including compensation for students and awarding interim degrees. A few suggested that they might withhold staff pay on the basis of partial performance. Others reported that they were dealing with a boycott, but didn't specify the mitigating actions they were planning.

Across the higher education sector, the main mitigations that were used included:

- Awarding degrees with interim classifications, which were later replaced by classifications incorporating the final marks.
- Awarding final classifications based on the results each student had achieved to date.
- Guaranteeing minimum classifications.
- Communicating consistently with students.
- Improving students' access to mental health support.
- Reallocating marking responsibilities, and taking on additional staff where necessary.
- Engaging with graduates' prospective employers, to request flexibility in accepting students without their final results or classifications.
- Engaging with postgraduate institutions to request conditional offers for affected students.
- Making compensation and goodwill payments.
- Extending degree presentation deadlines.
- Seeking to extend graduate visas for international students.

Conclusion

This publication sets out what we have heard from students, and some of what we know more broadly, about the impact on students of the 2023 marking and assessment boycott. It also shares students' mixed reactions to how well their institutions had responded to the boycott. As the regulator for higher education in England, our objective in such situations is to protect students' interests, ensure academic standards are secure and maintain public confidence in higher education.

Universities and colleges must continue to take responsibility, and plan proactively, to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by disruption in the event of any future marking and assessment boycotts or other industrial action that similarly affects students.

Notes

¹ UK Parliament Committees, '[Written evidence submitted by the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association](#)'.

² UK Parliament Committees, '[Written evidence submitted by the National Union of Students](#)'.

³ While the majority of responses to the poll will have been from university students, the eligible population included students at a small number of colleges offering higher education. In this report we have used 'university' or 'institution' for the sake of simplicity and readability. The students who participated in the focus group were all from universities.

⁴ The research was conducted online by YouGov and reporting analysis in this Student insight publication was completed by the OfS.

⁵ Where percentages do not add up to 100, this is due to rounding or the exclusion of 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say' responses, or because respondents were allowed to give multiple answers. When conducting surveys, the margin of error depends on the sample size and the distribution of answers. Larger samples reduce the margin of error. For a sample of 763 people, the margin of error is 3.55 per cent. This means the true value for the entire population is within 3.55 per cent of the survey result. For example, if 50 per cent of respondents gave a certain answer, we can be 95 per cent confident that the true percentage for the entire population is between 46.45 per cent and 53.55 per cent. If the answer is more definitive (like 90 per cent or 10 per cent), the margin of error is even smaller.

⁶ YouGov, 'Marking and assessment boycott: Topline findings' at OfS, '[Marking and assessment boycotts: Student insight report](#)'.

⁷ For more information on consumer protection law and students, see: OfS, '[Consumer protection for students](#)', published July 2024; OfS, '[Protecting students as consumers](#)' (OfS Insight brief #19), June 2023.

⁸ UK Parliament Committees, '[Impact of industrial action on university students](#)'.

⁹ Gov.UK, '[Minimum service levels in education](#)'.

¹⁰ UK Parliament Committees, '[Written evidence submitted by the Department for Education](#)'.

¹¹ UK Parliament Committees, '[Written evidence submitted by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education](#)'; Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, '[Annual report 2023](#)'.

