



UCU Marking and Assessment Boycott: Advice for QAA Members - June 2023 update

The June update to this advice includes additional material relating to the content of explanatory notes to accompany incomplete transcripts.

QAA is conscious that while the marking and assessment boycott is ongoing, providers are taking steps to mitigate its impact on students. While QAA does not hold a position on the industrial action currently taking place in the sector, academic standards is a crucial component of our role as the UK's independent quality body, and we are providing this advice in that context. The advice does not prescribe a singular approach but provides a range of options providers can consider as part of their mitigating actions to support the maintenance of academic standards and to assure the quality of the student experience.

May 2023

The University and College Union (UCU) ongoing industrial action includes a marking and assessment boycott (MAB) for UCU members at higher education institutions taking part in the pay and working conditions dispute. This action commenced on 20 April 2023 and runs to September 2023 based on the current mandate.

QAA's role as the UK's independent quality body is to help protect the student interest and support higher education providers and members to maintain academic standards. This advice outlines approaches that QAA Members may choose to adopt during this period of industrial action to support the maintenance of academic standards and ensure that students can progress in their studies, including graduating with the award they have earned.

Providers can use this advice to aid their decision-making on assessment and awards in the context of the marking boycott. Learning from the experience during the COVID-19 pandemic may also provide some valuable lessons that can be used to support student achievement and protect the value of qualifications.

What are the main issues that providers face?

QAA recognises the challenges that institutions face in potentially needing to adjust the format of upcoming assessments or find alternative ways of marking assessed work that has already been submitted. There are two complications: the inability to assess individual student submissions as a result of industrial action; and the resultant difficulty of making decisions on progression and the classification of awards based on partial data sets.

What actions can providers take to support student achievement and maintain standards?

If they have not already done so, institutions need to make clear their approach to progression/classification and decide what level of adjustments or alternative arrangements they need to make for marking in order to generate a minimum set of marks on which they can make reliable decisions regarding student performance and award. This is a particular challenge for courses that carry professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) accreditation. We would encourage providers to make arrangements to mark all completed assessments and especially significant pieces of work like projects and dissertations from final-year students, even if these have to be marked on an extended timescale. This is to avoid students being disadvantaged, particularly in relation to their graduation schedule and transition into employment.

Learning from the pandemic

The sector as a whole was able to pivot very quickly to adjust assessment requirements and awarding processes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. While the context of the marking boycott and that of the pandemic are not analogous, it will help institutions to consider the quality implications of a marking and assessment boycott and the flexibility that may already be built into processes as a result of the mitigations required for the pandemic. For example, you may already have provisions in your academic regulations for determining when and how students are to progress in the event of studies and assessment being disrupted.

Enabling students to progress

Potential measures to support student progression include:

- exercising flexibility in deadlines and submission dates for assessments still to be completed in the academic year
- maintaining effective communications with students if assessment requirements are adjusted in light of the boycott
- considering how many assessments have already been completed and whether students will be able to progress having met module or programme learning outcomes in previous assessments
- identifying the extent to which your regulations allow students to progress between levels of study trailing credit (or modules) that can be completed in the next academic period
- considering the potential impact on students who have final assessments in the form of exhibitions, shows or performances, clinical settings, laboratory work, viva voces, and workplace based experience, which may not be easily delivered at later stages of the academic calendar
- ensuring that any changes to assessment practices take account of the needs of disabled students to avoid creating additional barriers
- taking careful account of any specific requirements from PSRB accredited courses; PSRBs may require that certain modules must be passed in order to complete the course and under certain prescribed deadlines - we advise talking to relevant PSRB education teams as soon as possible to establish any flexibility.

We recognise that some of these suggestions will be more challenging to implement for students who will graduate in the current academic year. If an institution were to assess or

award using temporary or interim arrangements, it would be helpful to confirm with the students affected any decisions at the earliest possible opportunity. This would be particularly important for students who have employment arranged or are applying for further study based on the results of their award.

Explanatory note to accompany incomplete transcripts

Many (if not all) providers are offering an explanatory note or letter of comfort which students can share alongside their incomplete transcripts. It is useful for such notes to cover the following information:

- A clear indication that the student's results are incomplete as a result of the Marking and Assessment Boycott and not through any fault of the student.
- Highlight that students have been affected differentially across providers, programmes and even modules depending on the staff participating in the marking and assessment boycott.
- Where a student has been awarded a temporary or provisional award classification, or any other preliminary results, indicate the basis for that; in particular, make clear whether the student's result is likely to be lowered or raised based on further assessments being marked.
- Indication of any further achievements that the provider is able to verify or indication of where these might be found.
- Where additional information on the student's academic performance could be material to the student's successful onward transition (for example, to a postgraduate programme), indicate how the recipient of the note might access further information - such as from a member of academic staff, tutor or other source at the provider. If possible, it would be helpful to confirm the student's eligibility for bursaries and studentships.
- If possible, an indication of when the confirmed results are expected to be available.

Students who are likely to benefit from such explanatory notes are those with offers of employment, those seeking entry to postgraduate programmes or those intending to study internationally. For letters intended to support international mobility, please be aware of how UK terminology around preliminary and temporary results may be interpreted elsewhere in the world. It may be helpful to include additional detail to avoid students being disadvantaged.

In support of students moving to postgraduate study, it would also be useful to ensure that postgraduate admissions staff at the home institution are fully aware of the extent to which some students may have been disrupted by the boycott action.

If you would like to discuss this advice in more detail, please contact the QAA Quality and Standards team via membership@qaa.ac.uk