

Office for Students

Marking and Assessment

Boycott:

Topline findings

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Background and methodology

Background

In 2023 university staff working in 117 providers in England undertook a marking and assessment boycott (MAB), meaning for many students, summative and formative assessments either did not take place or were not marked, and there were delays to the marking of exams and coursework. The Office for Students commissioned this research in order to develop their understanding of the student experience at providers where there was a marking and assessment boycott. This includes students who were directly impacted by the MAB in some way (e.g. reduced lectures, assessment marking not completed), and those who were not directly impacted but were studying at an affected provider during this period.

Methodology

The quantitative survey was undertaken using YouGov's online panel. The fieldwork was carried out between the 12th and the 26th August 2024. In total, three groups of respondents were surveyed: undergraduate students and postgraduate students who were studying at an affected provider at the time of the MAB, and university graduates who graduated in 2023 from an affected provider.¹

The following completions were achieved in each group:

- Undergraduate students: 279
- Postgraduate students: 284
- University graduates: 200.

Notes for interpretation

The quantitative findings throughout the report are presented in the form of percentages, and all differences highlighted between sub-groups are statistically significant at an alpha level of 0.05 unless otherwise indicated. In some instances, apparent differences between figures may not be considered 'statistically significant' due to sample sizes.

Where percentages do not sum up to 100, this is due to rounding, the exclusion of 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say' responses, or because respondents could give multiple answers.

¹ 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. In this report we use 'university' for the sake of simplicity.

Key findings

Incidence of impact

The majority of students and graduates reported that their university course was impacted by the MAB in 2023 (52%), with incidence being lower among the postgraduate student sample (43%) compared to undergraduate students and graduates (both 57%).

Students and graduates were then asked, regardless of whether their course was impacted, to what extent they felt they were affected by the MAB. Two in five (42%) stated that they were affected to at least some extent. This was highest among undergraduate students (50%) and, unsurprisingly, those who previously reported their course was impacted (69%) compared to those whose course was not (13%).

Student concern during the marking and assessment boycott

The impact of the MAB was wide reaching. Over half (56%) of students and graduates reported being concerned about the MAB. This increased to 70% among those whose course was directly impacted, while 41% of those who were not impacted were still concerned. Reflecting the earlier results around the extent of impact, undergraduate students more commonly reported they were concerned (60%), with graduates reporting the same (60%). Comparatively, concern was lowest among postgraduates (49%).

Among those whose course was not directly impacted, over six in ten (63%) reported that they had any concerns during the MAB. The most common concern was for friends impacted by the boycott (32%); highest among graduates (38%). At an overall level, 25% reported being concerned that it would happen to their course in the 2022/2023 academic year, and a similar proportion (23%) were concerned about future academic years, although unsurprisingly this is driven by undergraduates (45%).

Ways students were impacted

Over half (53%) of those whose course was impacted by the MAB reported that their coursework was either not marked or delayed. This was followed by slightly fewer (46%) stating the same for their exams. While both impacts are consistent across sample groups, the proportions are predominantly driven by those stating there were delays (46% coursework; 43% exams) compared to not getting marked at all (11% coursework; 8% exams).

Broadly, the incidence of impacts experienced is consistent across sample groups, one of the exceptions being fewer or no meetings with supervisor, which is driven by postgraduates (37%) and graduates (42%) compared to undergraduates (19%).

At an overall level, those impacted by the MAB report that it reduced contact time. Most commonly, lecture time was reduced (68%), followed by lecturers' office hours (63%), seminars (62%) and time spent with supervisors (55%).

Of those whose course was affected, 33% reported that they still received verbal feedback on progress during the period of industrial action. This was consistent across all sample groups. Over a quarter reported that they continued to receive coursework results (28%) or exam results (27%). Significantly fewer identified that they received a dissertation result (11%), although this was driven by postgraduates (15%) and graduates (18%).

Wider impact of the marking and assessment boycott

Thinking generally about the impact on the quality of their academic work, those whose course was directly impacted most commonly stated that the MAB had a negative impact (49%), although one-sixth (16%) stated there was a positive impact. Slightly lower proportions report that it impacted their grades; 42% negative and 14% positive. This is due to a higher proportion stating that there was no impact (45% vs 35%). While the proportion who report that it had a negative impact on both of these areas was consistent across sample groups, undergraduates were significantly more likely to report a positive impact (24% quality; 20% grades).

Linked to these perceptions, 38% of all students and graduates, regardless of whether they were personally impacted by the MAB, reported that the quality of their education decreased as a result of the boycott, and a similar proportion stated that the value for money for their degree decreased (41%). These perceptions were driven by undergraduate students (52% quality; 54% value for money).

Aside from academic impacts, students and graduates most commonly stated that the MAB negatively impacted their stress levels (41%), followed by their mental health (32%) and their social life (15%). Undergraduates (17%) and graduates (18%) were most likely to report there was a negative impact on their social life.

However, reactions to their university during this time are mixed; half (50%) of students and graduates agreed that their university was working with the best interest of their students (24% disagreed), while 42% reported that the MAB decreased their trust in their university (13% reported it increased trust).

Only 36% reported being satisfied with how their university handled the MAB, with satisfaction being higher with tutors and lecturers specifically (54%). When comparing satisfaction levels among those whose course was affected by the MAB and those who were not, the proportion of those who reported they were satisfied with how their university handled it did not change (36% in both groups);

however, dissatisfaction increased significantly among those who were affected, to over half (54%), compared to those who were not (18%). This difference was largely due to a larger proportion of those who were not affected selecting 'not applicable'.

Information regarding the MAB

Overall, email, either university wide or subject wide (65%), was by far the most common way of communicating information and updates about the MAB to students and graduates. Email communications were more common among those whose course was impacted by the MAB (71%) than those whose course was not impacted (58%). In contrast, communication on this subject during lectures and seminars was much less common, with overall only 22% reporting that they received information and updates about the MAB in this manner. Postgraduates were the group least likely to have received communications about the MAB in this way (14%) compared to 27% for both undergraduates and graduates. Among those whose course was impacted by the MAB, 27% said they received information and updates from lecturers and seminars compared to 17% whose course was not impacted.

Among those who received information about the MAB, 63% said that they received updates on this subject from the university as a whole. In comparison, 39% said they received updates from individual lecturers and staff while 30% said they received updates from the student union. Postgraduates were most likely to say they received updates from the university as a whole (69%) while undergraduates were least likely (56%). Those whose course was impacted by the MAB were more likely to receive updates from individual lecturers & staff (45% vs 32% not affected) and from the student union (34% vs 24% not affected).

Satisfaction with the information provided by the different sources was relatively high. Most positively rated was information received from lecturers and staff (78% net satisfied), followed by the student union (74% net satisfied) and finally from the university as a whole (64% net satisfied). In all cases, however, satisfaction was lower among those whose course was affected by the MAB compared to those whose course was unaffected. Conversely, dissatisfaction was significantly higher among the affected group. The biggest disparity between those who were dissatisfied was for information provided by the university as a whole, for which 40% of those whose course was affected said they were dissatisfied, compared to 18% of those whose course was unaffected.

Compensation due to the MAB

Those whose course was affected by the MAB were asked if the university provided any alternatives or compensation as a result of the MAB. Among this group, just under half (46%) reported they were offered some kind of alternative or compensation, while slightly fewer (43%) stated they weren't

offered anything. The most common type of alternative or compensation provided was 'no detriment' policies to ensure they weren't unfairly disadvantaged, e.g. assurance that either their provisional grade or their actual grade is used (whichever is higher), or automatically considering exceptional circumstances (26%). This is followed by content taught during the marking and assessment boycott not being asked about in exams and coursework (11%). A no detriment policy was mentioned most commonly by graduates (36%), significantly higher than by postgraduates (18%). Graduates were also more likely to say that content taught during the MAB was not asked about in exams or coursework (18%), compared to 8% of undergraduates.

Only three in ten (30%) of those whose course was affected by the MAB said they were aware of their right to request financial compensation. There were no significant differences in the number of those aware across the different student groups. The most common way of finding out about this type of compensation was being told by the university (13%), marginally ahead of finding out another way (10%) and finding out from a lecturer or tutor (7%).

Of the limited number who were aware of their right to request financial compensation, just under six in ten (58%) said they requested it, of which 31% said they requested and received it, 21% said they requested it and did not get it, and 6% said they requested it and that the process is still ongoing. Four in ten (42%) did not request it at all. At an overall level, this translated to 9% of those who reported they were affected by the MAB stating that they requested it and received it, 6% reporting they requested it and did not get it, and 2% stating they requested it and the process was still ongoing.

No detriment policy

Overall, one quarter (26%) of all students and graduates reported they had heard of a no detriment policy while a further 74% stated they had not. Among those who had heard of it, graduates (37%) were more likely to be aware of the policy than postgraduates (26%), and both these groups were more aware than undergraduates (18%). There was no significant difference in awareness between those whose course had been impacted by MAB and those whose course had not.

Among those who said they were aware of the policy and who had been impacted by the MAB, just under half (48%) report that they understood, to the best of their knowledge, that there was a no detriment policy in place for them during the MAB. Conversely, 23% said they did not know this policy was in place for them, while a further 29% said they did not know.

Among the relatively small number who said they were aware that a no detriment policy was in place, 28% said they felt they understood the policy very well, 50% said they felt they understood it a fair

amount, while 22% said they felt they understood it not very well. No one said they didn't understand it at all.