



On 30 March, representatives of the five trade unions of the New Joint Negotiating Committee for the Higher Education Sector (JNCHES) met with representatives of the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association (UCEA) in the first meeting of the 2022-23 bargaining round. This occurs in the middle of an ongoing dispute and industrial action over the 2021-22 round, and a live ballot from three of the five trade unions.

These negotiations take place at a critical moment for our sector, in which our members face spiralling inflation and unhealthy working conditions. Our claim <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12528/HE-unions-claim-2022-23/pdf/TUJNCHESclaim202223FINAL.pdf> was prepared over three months, and the headline demands were given to UCEA on 28 February.

Having had these headline demands for over one month, and having consulted their member institutions, UCEA representatives were well placed to table an opening offer to address both the serious cost of living crisis facing our members, and the deep seated discontent in the higher education sector. These are unprecedented times and we can't underestimate the impact on our members, and we would expect UCEA representatives to act with urgency in putting an offer on the table.

Instead, early in the negotiations UCEA informed us that they were 'not yet in a position' to present their offer to our members. Delaying serious negotiations is unacceptable given UCEA's responsibility to staff, students - and to the employers who are their members. The joint trade unions are committed to the process of collective bargaining, and the clear benefits that sector-wide standards for pay and working conditions offer higher education in the United Kingdom. Following just under five hours of discussions, ending with a powerful presentation on the insulting and derisory nature of a decision to frustrate negotiations, the trade unions were forced to conclude that UCEA had no intention of negotiating seriously.

Given the immense pressure that is facing HE institutions and staff from continued industrial action, and the prospect of more joint action in the near future, we must question UCEA's judgment in delaying meaningful negotiations, and whether they did in fact have a mandate to delay from their constituent member institutions.

Our members have stood by universities over the last 2 years when they were told there was financial uncertainty due to Brexit and COVID which did not materialise. They have been on and off furlough, changed roles, adapted to working on and off campus, taken on additional responsibilities. Our members will rightly feel that the last 2 years have disproportionately impacted some of the lowest paid workers and equality groups in our sector.

We are aware that members will share our outrage at the behaviour of our employers' negotiators, and call on employers who share this displeasure and who wish for an end to the unhealthy industrial relations in this sector, to ask whether their representative's acting in this way is in the best interests of employers, staff and students. Trade union representatives view the conditions facing our members and the sector with the utmost seriousness, and will continue to seek a resolution which will lead to a healthy and flourishing sector focusing on a shared commitment to education and discovery of knowledge.