Guidance for students during the UCU industrial action

The following set of Frequently Asked Questions provides information and advice in relation to the proposed strike action by The University & College Union (UCU). These have been refreshed on 6 April 2018.

- What is the strike/dispute about?

Birkbeck is one of 61 universities participating in the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pension scheme. The Pensions Regulator is concerned that USS assets may not be sufficient to cover all future pensions. As a result, the USS has proposed changes to the amount individuals and Universities pay into the scheme and the retirement benefits that staff will receive for future payments. Members of the University and College Union (UCU) - which represents academic and professional services staff - voted for strike action to protest these proposals. You can read the UCU statement about the strike on their website.

- What is Birkbeck’s position in the dispute? NEW

This is a national industrial dispute, not a local one. Professor David Latchman, Master of Birkbeck, has made clear the College does not believe a dispute is in the interests of students or staff. Professor Latchman has consistently called for both employer bodies and the UCU to negotiate a compromise based on the best affordable future pension package. Birkbeck staff are committed to our students, who often make extraordinary sacrifices to study with us. Please be assured the College will do all it can to minimise any disruption to your studies.

You can read the Master’s letter sent to UUK on 14 March 2018, setting out Birkbeck’s position here.

- Is there more industrial action planned? NEW

UCU has notified the College there will be industrial action on 23, 24, 25, 26 and 27 April 2018. When further information is available we will publish it here.

- What help is available to allow me to catch up? NEW

Please do talk to lecturing and support staff and seek guidance on how to prepare yourself for upcoming assessments. There are also a wide variety of workshops and learning resources that you can book into. During the summer term the College will be introducing a number of academic support sessions from 5.00 pm – 6.00 pm to help support your studies. Your department will tell you about these directly.
- **Will exams contain questions on the areas that should be covered during the strike action?** NEW

You will not be assessed on topics that have not been covered in class or in course material. Attendance requirements will not apply to cancelled classes. The forthcoming examination period will continue as planned.

Examination Boards will consider the impact of the UCU strike and operate in line with our policies and regulations. Birkbeck has well-established Academic Regulations for managing complex assessment scenarios and the College is confident our academic standards will continue to be maintained.

- **Will Birkbeck be offering refunds for cancelled classes?**

The strike may have disrupted some of our scheduled teaching and learning but our teaching and professional services staff are still committed to helping you achieve your long-term goals of gaining a qualification from Birkbeck.

Your tuition fees contribute towards your entire learning experience and are not directly linked to specific contact or teaching hours. Your tuition fees also cover infrastructure such as buildings, library and IT infrastructure. We are doing everything we can to mitigate any impact on your student experience and your ability to succeed in your studies.

- **Will my coursework or assessment submission deadlines be altered by the strike?**

Please continue to submit your coursework and assessments by the published deadline. Please talk to your department if you are concerned that assessment and/or feedback is not being delivered within four weeks of submission.

- **Will my Tier 4 status be compromised if I miss a lecture due to a strike?**

Tier 4 students should continue to attend their classes, registration sessions and liaise with International Student Administration as normal. Students will not be recorded as absent from classes that are cancelled. If you are sponsored on a Tier 4 visa you should continue to attend all scheduled classes and registration points. If you are concerned about your attendance, please contact International Student Administration. For academic support with your studies, please contact your Department.

- **What should I do if there’s a picket line outside the building?**

When faced with a picket line, it is at your absolute discretion whether or not you stop and talk to the people undertaking industrial action. You aren’t obliged to take a leaflet if offered one. Neither is anyone on a picket line allowed to prevent you from entering a Birkbeck building. You may even see people on the picket line that you recognise. Our advice is that if you don’t want to talk to them on this occasion, just carry on in. There are many reasons why you may be going into a Birkbeck building - to visit the library, to access a
computer or student support services or to visit the Students’ Union. You do not have to explain why.

- **How will it affect me?**

Unfortunately, we don’t yet know what impact the strike will have on each individual or module, as disruption will depend on which staff participate. The College will not necessarily know in advance who is taking part in the strike, but has asked UCU members to help give students as much notice as possible, if they plan to strike.

- **Where will I find the latest information on whether my class is cancelled?**

Teaching staff have been asked to let you know in advance if they will be on strike. Please check your emails for the latest information.

- **What will happen if my lectures are cancelled?**

The College recognises the extraordinary sacrifices students make to study at Birkbeck. We have stressed, in our discussions with the local UCU union branch, the importance of minimising disruption and asked staff to provide information about cancellations as early as possible. Material may be provided for cancelled classes or incorporated into other lectures or seminars.

Birkbeck will seek to ensure that all students receive the necessary education and support to enable them to meet the learning outcomes of their programme of study.

- **If my class is cancelled, is there somewhere I can meet on campus with my fellow students for a study group?**

Yes. At the Malet street reception on strike days you will find a list of teaching and computer rooms (not laboratories) available for study within the normal teaching times.

- **How can I continue my studies during the strike?**

We believe many classes will continue as usual and we are doing all we can to mitigate the impact of those that are cancelled. Study resources and reading lists remain available on Moodle and the library continues to be open throughout the strike action so you can continue to conduct individual and group learning. You can access study skills support [here](#).

- **Will I still get supervision and/or work marked?**

Whilst there is no specific marking or supervision boycott, due to the volume of strike days there may be delays to marks being returned or supervisory meetings being scheduled. You are encouraged to contact your supervisors or lecturers to ask for clarification.

- **What can I do if I feel my work is being affected by the strike?**
Please contact your Personal Tutor to discuss your concerns or the Student Advice Centre who will be able to signpost you to other support. You do not need to submit Mitigating Circumstances in relation to the UCU industrial action as the Boards of Examiners will be asked to consistently take into account the potential impact of strike action.

- **Can I work unsupervised in a laboratory setting during a strike?**

If a laboratory class is cancelled you may not use the laboratory in the absence of supervising staff. Project and PhD students should only work, in the absence of the normal oversight, where they have been given the permission of their supervisor to carry out experiments without direct supervision and a COSHH/risk assessment has been completed for the tasks undertaken. If the work is assessed as unsuitable for lone working if there is no one else present, the work should not continue. There are some situations when lone working must never take place e.g. where there is a risk of sudden serious injury, ill health or death should a procedure go accidentally wrong or if safety procedures are not followed.

- **Will training and professional development events for PhD students be affected by the strike?**

If a training session is cancelled you will be contacted in advance to confirm this. You should check your emails for updates about training events on strike days in case they need to be cancelled or postponed.