Update to Northampton UCU Members re proposed three-week marking turnaround; October 2026

Dear fellow union members,

The UCU Branch Executive has received a significant amount of feedback from the membership regarding the proposal by the University Leadership Team (ULT) to move from a four to a three-week turnaround for marking. This is currently probably the single most raised item of concern. For the avoidance of doubt, the Branch Executive has not agreed to such proposals, has raised a number of health and safety related issues, and remains opposed to this proposal.

As recorded in the minutes of a Trade Union Liaison (TUL) meeting held in April this year:

UCU voiced opposition to the 'revised' academic standards document (Attached to email) which we had been told there would be further discussion on by Alice Wilby back in March before adoption, but all three main objections appear to have been retained without consideration to objections: peer review, a 15 minute 'video summary' of every lecture and three week marking turnaround. GB insists this goes to Senate tomorrow.

UCU and Unison asked for it to be removed from the senate meeting to take place tomorrow to allow further discussion. Refused by GB who says he will not remove an item with 24hr notice, despite this being normal if a policy is not fully agreed. The Academic standards doc will be rolled out from Sept 26, with 3-week marking left to sept 27. Much discussion about the issues with the policy and the ramifications for staff.

It is noted that, as part of Curriculum Vision, staff have the opportunity to consider redesigning assessments to try and make the marking process easier. However, as a number of you have rightly pointed out, the speed at which we are able to read written work will not increase. Members have also pointed that it is sometimes difficult to meet the existing four-week turnaround without undertaking marking in the evenings and weekends. If it is difficult for a conscientious person to do a task in four weeks, then it may be even harder to do it in three.

The Branch Executive, with the support of the UCU regional officer, remains in correspondence with ULT on this matter, and our figurative door is always open. However, our priority is our members and we would like to advise individuals of the following steps that may be taken if you have concerns about your current ability to meet marking deadlines due to a health condition or disability:

a) Consider completing a Workplace Adjustment Passport. This is a document agreed between you and your line manager to support you at work because of a health condition or disability. It means that reasonable adjustments should be implemented, and recorded, if there are work-related tasks which you are finding difficulties with.
b) Consider requesting an occupational health referral for any health condition or disability. Such a meeting with an OH professional may help you to identify other forms of support which might be need, and can help to support any reasonable adjustments in a workplace passport. For example, a person with eyesight problems may need longer to read essays. If you think you may need an occupational health referral then you should contact the HR Advisor that supports your faculty. Feedback from members over the last 12 months suggests that HR staff have been supportive in this regard.
c) Once you are aware that you will not be able to meet a marking deadline, whether or not you have a Workplace Adjustment Passport then make your line manager aware, and keep the students informed. Do this at the earliest opportunity during your working hours. As a number of members have helpfully informed us, there has been a normative practice in one faculty of grade publication dates being extended at Dean level; a common-sense approach. Notifying line managers/heads of school is nonetheless particularly important, as at the Trade Union Liaison (TUL) meeting of 30/6/2026 the Academic Registrar stated that " *If it is too difficult to achieve in specific areas then there would be discussions about how that area could be helped".*

How long should we spend marking essays?

There does not appear to be specific guidance issued to permanent staff regarding how much time should be spent marking scripts. All members are therefore encouraged to familiarise themselves with the marking timeframes that are issued to associate lecturers. We understand that these guidelines have been referred to by some line managers in meetings with permanent academic staff. The current (August 2026) AL Handbook states the following re marking at page 14:

> *'No. of hours to be determined in advance of work commencing (As a guide typically 1 hr per 20 credit assignment of 4000 words or equivalent, adjusted pro-rata depending on credits and wordcount).'*

This guidance suggests that 30 minutes should be spent marking a 2,000 word piece, and 15 minutes for a 1,000 word piece. Some members have already stated that, understandably, it would take them more than 15 minutes to read and absorb a 1,000 essay, let alone start to write feedback/forward.

Therefore, the practice of what has been termed "light-touch" marking practice is something that we would like to anonymously collate your thoughts on. How long is it typically taking you to read a 1,000 word essay or report? How much time do you factor in for screen breaks?

Do you feel that perhaps pasting-in selected prepared phrases in to Turnitin would help meet a 15 minute, and ultimately a three-week turnaround? What other compromises on quality, if any, do you think may be likely to meet a three-week target? Please contact us at northantsucu@gmail.com from which ever email address you feel most comfortable using.

Finally, a considerable number of both members and non-members have expressed their fears over being taken down a performance management, or disciplinary route if they are unable to meet the three-week marking turnaround. At the TUL meeting of 30/6/26 the Academic Registrar was questioned on this and stated “I don’t see a direct line to any HR processes as not their policy." Whilst this should offer some reassurance on this point, any members who think they may be taken down either the Managing & Supporting Performance Policy and Procedure, or the Disciplinary Policy and Procedure, should immediately contact the union for support. You are welcome to share this newsletter with non-members; but please advise them to join a trade union!

Yours in solidarity, Northampton UCU Branch Executive.