

24 November 2020

Dear CEO/Principal,

I hope that you and those close are, and continue to be, safe and well.

This Thursday, 26 November, the Joint Trade Unions for Further Education (FE) in England will be meeting with your representatives from the Association of Colleges (AoC) to discuss the unions' 2020/21 claim.

I hope that you will have seen the unions' [claim](#). The claim was drafted to unite our sector behind a recognition and celebration of what we do and what we have achieved in spite of the adversity of both prolonged austerity and the pandemic.

We know that FE will be called upon to play an historic role in the nation's post-pandemic recovery effort. We also know that a decade of austerity has left the sector with a loss of more than 24,000 teaching jobs and a 30% real terms cut in pay for FE staff.

You would not be surprised that UCU rejects a return to austerity pay freezes and any cynical attempt to drive a wedge between workers in the NHS and workers in the rest of the public and private sectors. All workers who provide vital support to their communities deserve to be fairly rewarded and that includes staff working in colleges.

There is much that is unique about FE. It has the power to transform lives, and to reach those that other parts of the education sector cannot. Unfortunately the financial pain that FE staff have suffered over the last decade with a 30% cut in pay is also undisputedly unique within all of the public sector.

The other thing unique to our sector is trade union members who have lost almost a third of the value of their pay uniting with their employers to campaign and march alongside them. This is otherwise unheard of, and too precious to put at risk.

Over a number of years trade unions, the AoC and college leaders have united to campaign for increased funding for our much overlooked and neglected sector. By working together and being united we succeeded in raising the political and public profile of FE to levels not previously seen in recent years. As a result we secured £400 million of extra funding, including an increase to the 16-19 base rate from 1 August 2020.

There is no dispute that pay in FE is a problem and unfair. This is acknowledged by all, government, the Department for Education (DfE), AoC and unions.

The case we made and won together for extra funding was to give colleges the money to make a significant shift in this year's pay offer. The AoC told us that it couldn't be done last year because the money wouldn't arrive until 2020/2021. That time is now here.

In light of that unprecedented joint effort which secured a turnaround of funding for the FE sector, any failure to deliver on promises to increase pay when the funding has arrived will be seen by staff as a betrayal. It will threaten the future of joint working and any faith in our sector's ability to spend money in the way it was intended.

At a time when the government is asking big questions about the appropriate structure of the further education sector in England, it would also send a damaging message about the willingness and ability of sector leaders to deliver on their word.

UCU will continue to vigorously campaign and lobby for the funding required by colleges to cover any costs related to COVID-19. We have called for a fully funded, sustainable solution to create COVID-safe study spaces for further education students who, for whatever reasons, are unable to continue their study at home during the pandemic.

However, the challenges posed to colleges by the pandemic do not erase or minimise the challenges that FE staff have in making ends meet. If anything, they have made these more acute.

All of us who care about FE cannot accept FE staff falling even further behind their colleagues working in schools. To do so would be to undermine the vital importance of FE in helping to rebuild this nation's economy in the wake of COVID.

I am therefore asking you to make representations to the AoC that they recommend an increase in staff pay for 2020/21 which is in line with the joint trade unions' claim, and recommit to working with the unions to campaign for the continued long-term investment our sector needs.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrew Harden', written in a cursive style.

Andrew Harden
Head of Further Education