

Diane Dodds
Minister for the Economy
Department for the Economy
Netherleigh
Massey Avenue
Belfast
BT4 2JP

16 February 2021

Dear Minister Dodds

**RE: Declaration of a trade dispute by the University and College Union (UCU).
Further Education lecturer pay**

As you are aware the UCU declared a dispute with all six of Northern Ireland's Further Education colleges regarding their attempt to make a substantial pay award conditional upon the Trade Unions surrendering collective bargaining rights and accepting regressive changes to members' terms and conditions.

Since the previous occasion the UCU contacted government about these issues, the College Employers' Forum (CEF) to their credit, changed the composition of their negotiating team. This created space for the Trade Unions to resume talks in a collegial environment based upon a social partnership ethos.

Last week the employers advised the most they could offer from within existing college budgets for a pay award was 7% over a four year period, this fares little better than pay restraint and does not adequately compensate for the years when lecturers received no cost of living increases at all. The employers acknowledge the offer is insufficient and both the Trade Unions and the employers are united in our view that lecturers require a double figure percentage increase if the problem of recruitment and retention is to be properly addressed. FE lecturers have received a paltry 3.8% increase in total since 2013/14. The reason the employers cannot offer more, stems from a refusal by the Department for the Economy to allocate additional monies to secure the future of Further Education. This is unacceptable. 7% over four years in the context of the previous capped awards equates to 1.2% per year over a nine year period. No other workforce in the public sector has been subject to such a derisory

increase.

To make matters worse, the previous Management Side negotiators published pay rates to the sector modelled on Scotland FE salaries amounting to a 10.7% increase, proclaiming these salaries were deliverable, along with a £4k back payment, but for the Trade Unions refusing the strings attached. The CEF has now admitted the associated business case was rejected by the Department of Finance in 2017, some three years before these rates were published to staff and two years before negotiations opened with the Trade Unions. While we welcome the employers' most recent transparency, you will appreciate the publication of these salary scales raised an expectation amongst our membership. The UCU consider that expectation to be perfectly reasonable when set against benchmarking of the sector in a comparable jurisdiction.

Lecturers in Scotland have been awarded a further 2% on all pay bands as of September 2020 taking the top of the main grade lecturer scale to £42,357.

Minister Weir has advocated on behalf of and secured pay increases for school teachers as has the Health Minister for NHS staff. The UCU cannot understand why the DfE values the work of our members so poorly. An enormous effort was made (and continues to be) to ensure the provision of further education to students during the pandemic. Our members have delivered high quality teaching and learning online, they have gone above and beyond providing pastoral care to their students struggling to cope with the challenging environment lockdown restrictions present.

The further education sector is absolutely central to rebuilding the economy in the post Covid landscape, colleges will become the centres for re-skilling those whose jobs in affected industries disappear. Without a substantial pay increase it will be impossible for colleges to attract and retain the experienced staff essential to aid the national recovery effort. Colleges simply cannot continue to be outbid for staff by the rest of the education sector when their role is so central to rebooting the economy.

The responsibility of these budget reductions suppressing lecturer pay cannot continue to be passed down to individual employing institutions. Colleges cannot be expected to be held accountable for stagnating pay in circumstances where the Minister or Department sets the overall amount of resource available to them as employers.

Consequently, and having taken legal advice in this matter, the UCU is advised that under the provisions of Article 127(2) of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 we should declare that a trade dispute exists between our members and the Department, which is also to be treated as a dispute between our members and their employers. We consider that only the Department, or you as Minister, can settle this dispute about pay by exercising your powers and, for example, enlarging the DfE budget allocated to colleges to enable employers to deliver the pay rise required.

Accordingly, unless I hear from you within seven days of today's date that you will take all appropriate measures within your powers including representations to the Department of Finance to address the matter of lecturer pay, the UCU will move to ballot its members in further education to take industrial action in furtherance of this dispute.

Yours sincerely

Katharine Clarke
UCU Northern Ireland Official