

**UCU response to the
Inquiry into ‘Skills for the future: apprenticeships and training’
by the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee**

1. Introduction

The University and College Union (UCU) represents over 120,000 members, drawn from teaching and allied staff from all the post-16 education sectors: universities, further education, adult education and prison education. UCU welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. We will answer the questions / elements of the questions most relevant to UCU and our members.

2. The Inquiry questions

2.1 Is the UK’s skills and training system capable of equipping increasing numbers of people with skills [for the future of the UK economy]?

First, in our opinion, *each* of the post-16 education sectors have a role to play in the delivery of skills, and those sectors are:

- i) The Further Education (FE) sector;
- ii) The Adult Education sector; and
- iii) The Prison Education sector.

The DfE’s FE workforce data 2024 (for 2022 – 2023) found that over 51% of all teachers who teach in the FE sectors teach vocational subjects,¹ which illustrates the importance of FE colleges in skills training.

The answer to whether the UK’s skills/training system is capable of equipping increasing numbers of people with skills is two-pronged, that is, do each of the post-16 education sectors have the resources to deliver the skills and training needs in terms of:

- i) Estates and equipment; and
- ii) Staff.

We address this question from a staff resourcing perspective in the post-16 education sectors, which includes the following considerations:

- i) Low pay;
- ii) High workload;
- iii) Casualised / precarious employment contracts;
- iv) No sector-wide national bargaining agreements (unlike in the schools, sixth form college and Higher Education sectors).
- v) General, overarching lack of professional respect for teaching staff in the FE, Adult Education and prison education sectors, expressed through low pay, high workloads, precarious employment contracts and no sectoral national bargaining agreements.

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-workforce>

The impacts of poor employment terms in the post-16 education sector

In the FE sector, the impact of the poor employment terms can be seen in the DfE's annual FE workforce survey data. The DfE headline data, however, can be misleading because they show an average across both the FE sector AND the sixth form college sector. In reality, salaries in the sixth form college sector are higher than in the FE sector (with their starting salaries already in excess of £30,000). Below are some sample data of high vacancy rates from the academic year 2022/23 (published May 2024):

- 4.7 per 100 teaching positions were vacant (across both the FE and sixth form college sectors);
- This figure increases to 5.1 per 100 teaching positions in the FE sector alone
- For Maths, 5.6 per 100 teaching positions were vacant in the FE sector
- For Maths in London, 7.9 per 100 teaching positions were vacant in the FE sector
- For Computer Science, 7.2 per 100 teaching positions were vacant
- For Computer Science in the East Midlands, 14 per 100 teaching positions were vacant
- For Construction, Planning and the Built Environment, 10 per 100 teaching positions were vacant in the FE sector
- For Construction etc in the South West, 13 per 100 teaching positions were vacant.

Another issue in the FE sector is the low number of teachers entering the profession compared to a higher number exiting the profession; this equation can be quantified from the DfE's FE workforce data.

Three points are relevant here:

- i) The combined headline figures can 'hide' the true extent of the vacancy problems in the FE sector;
- ii) The vacancy problems lead to larger class sizes, less attention given to individual students, higher workload for teachers (e.g. more assessments to mark) and in some instances, cancelled courses;
- iii) When the government is focused on the 'Missions' to a) Kickstart economic growth; and b) Break down barriers to opportunity, through focusing on subjects which include Construction and the Built Environment, Digital, and Health and Science, the high vacancy levels naturally frustrate those Mission aims.

Case study example of the adverse effects of recruitment and retention issues

In 2022/23 it was brought to our attention that an FE college in the West Midlands had withdrawn from providing apprenticeship training. The evidence we received was that the college had received a poor OFSTED rating, however that this was due to difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers in apprenticeship-related subjects. The college concerned was in Zarah Sultana MP's constituency. She succeeded in getting a Westminster Hall debate on the wider issue of school and college funding in the Midlands.² Around the same time, the House of Commons Education Select Committee were conducting an Inquiry into *'Teacher*

² <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/5f453dae-9d7e-4515-9e01-7f71b4ac09b4>

recruitment, training and retention' (including FE teachers). They published their findings in May 2024,³ welcoming the introduction of a £30k starting salary (for schoolteachers only), and recommending that it and progression salaries be kept under reviewed over the years to remain competitive. Also simultaneously, Policy Connect were conducting their '*Skills 2030*' Inquiry, which also published its findings in May 2024, with one of its recommendations being that the DfE should deliver a new Further Education Workforce Strategy to include a plan to increase the attractiveness of pay, contracts and workload in the sector.

2.2 What should the Government's proposed post-16 education strategy include in relation to apprenticeships and training?

Alongside the Education Select Committee's recommendations (May 2024) and the Policy Connect recommendations (May 2024), mentioned above, UCU's position is expressed in two campaigns: '*A New Deal for FE*',⁴ and '*UCU Prison Educators - Unlocking Futures*',⁵ and in summary, the way to secure the delivery of good quality skills for the UK economy is through better employment terms for each of the post-16 education sectors. Other relevant UCU documents include *Respect FE: Charter for Professional Respect in Further Education*⁶ and the *Adult Community Education Manifesto*.⁷

The *New Deal for FE* outlines specific actions needed to achieve greater respect for the FE sector, which include (amongst others):

- i) A 10% / £3000 pay rise
- ii) Parity of pay with schoolteachers within 3-years
- iii) A minimum starting salary of £30,000
- iv) National bargaining agreements.

2.3 The Commercialisation of education - education as a business

UCU is opposed to the privatisation of tertiary education. We are of the opinion that the interest of education is best served by an education system that is funded and controlled by the public sector that is accountable to the electorate.⁸ The commercialisation of education has created a number of issues over the years, which have led to various reviews e.g. the market review of initial teacher training (ITT) in 2021.⁹ Nowhere are the problems of commercialisation of education more prevalent than in prison education.¹⁰

2.4 Youth guarantee of access to training

UCU have developed a youth guarantee model, published in '*Engaging young people not in education, employment or training: The case for a Youth Resolution*': [Layout 1 \(ucu.org.uk\)](https://www.ucu.org.uk).

³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/44798/documents/222606/default/>

⁴ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/NewDealForFE>

⁵ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/UnlockingFutures>

⁶ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12495/A-charter-for-professional-respect-in-further-education/pdf/UCU_Respect_FE_charter2.pdf

⁷ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/13225/Adult-and-community-education-manifesto-2023/pdf/UCU_ACE_Manifesto_Feb_23.pdf

⁸ www.ucu.org.uk/stopprivatisation

⁹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-itt-market-review#:~:text=This%20document%20explains%20the%20focus%20of%20the%20ITT%20market%20review,

¹⁰ www.ucu.org.uk/UnlockingFutures

2.5 Should further education be funded in a demand-led way, as is the case for HE

A shift to the HE model of funding is not a model UCU would support for the FE sector. The HE funding model has a number of negative features: it has pitted universities against each other to compete for students as an income stream, and it has left students straddled with high, long-term debt, which impacts on their psychological health and leads to compromised life-style options. It is well established that those from the lower social classes are debt-averse and that the fee-paying model has a deterrent effect on some would-be students. Rather than facilitate widening participation to higher education, the funding model has, especially in conjunction with the recent cost-of-living crisis, widened the gap between young people who can and who cannot afford higher education. The model also risks the narrowing of the subjects offer and course closures. We do not want to see the existing problems in the HE sector being transposed to the FE sector.

Contextual support for our position can be found in several pieces of research including a 2024 piece of research commissioned by the Office for Students (OfS)¹¹ in relation to the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE).¹² The LLE was introduced by government in 2023 to, amongst other things, extend students' loans to Level 4 and 5 education (pre-degree) in post-18 education. The research found that 4 in 5 LLE trial courses failed to launch due to low demand, and of those enrolled, about 50% of students were employer rather than self-funded. This translates to only 17 out of a potential 96 courses launching after low registrations – only 125 people out of a target of 2,000 enrolled, with only 41 learners opting to claim the new LLE loan. This experience resembles a similar government experiment a decade or so earlier¹³ and also, the experience of the Student Loans Company.¹⁴

3. Conclusion

The collective letter¹⁵ (2 October 2024) from 172 FE college leaders, via the Association of Colleges, to the Chancellor Rachel Reeves MP, speaks for itself. The submissions in the letter support our calls over the last few years for increased funding, in saying that “*staffing challenge facing colleges is stark*”, that the “*pay lags far behind school teacher pay... and even further to industry*”, and that without further investment, the skills sector is going to be hampered, meaning it is “*unlikely that the government will be able to fully deliver a number of manifesto commitments*” relating to public services. The fact that this call is coming from the Association of Colleges, as the **employer** body, at this eleventh hour, is indicative of how deep the crisis is in the FE sector and of the urgency for increased funding.

Rhianwen Roberts, Policy Officer – Further Education

¹¹ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/evaluation-of-the-higher-education-short-course-trial/

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/lifelong-learning-entitlement-lle-overview/lifelong-learning-entitlement-overview>

¹³ www.ucu.org.uk/article/6860/Government-axes-controversial-student-loan-scheme-after-it-fails-to-attract-applicants

¹⁴ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/advanced-learner-loans-paid-in-england-ay-202324-aug-to-jul/advanced-learner-loans-paid-in-england-academic-year-202324-august-to-july-inclusive

¹⁵ feweek.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/College-leaders-letter-to-the-Chancellor-final.pdf