

UCU response to the Education Committee Inquiry into *‘Further Education and Skills’*

“Our key message remains resolute: *the further education sector must be sufficiently funded, with better pay and conditions for the teachers, in order to attract and retain staff to supply skills to the economy*” **Jo Grady, UCU General Secretary**

Executive Summary

1. We, the University and College Union (UCU), represent over 120,000 staff employed in the post-16 education sector, including teachers, lecturers and related staff in Further Education (FE), Adult and Community Education (ACE), Prison Education and Higher Education (HE).
2. We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Education Committee’s FE and Skills Inquiry. We will answer the Inquiry questions, or elements of, most relevant to our FE members.
3. We observe that there has been growing political momentum behind addressing the issues highlighted by the FE and Skills Inquiry. Some of the work conducted includes:
 - House of Commons Education Committee report into ‘*Teacher recruitment, training and retention*’ (May 2024);¹
 - Department for Education’s ‘*Curriculum and Assessment Review*’² with recommendations due to be published in 2025;
 - The House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee *Inquiry into ‘Skills for the future: apprenticeships and training’* (2024/5);³
 - Department for Business and Trade consultation, ‘*Invest 2035: the UK’s modern industrial strategy*’ (2024/5);⁴
 - The House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into ‘*Solving the SEND Crisis*’ (2025);⁵
 - Various Policy Connect Inquiries e.g. ‘*Skills 2030: Building a World-Class Skills System*’ (2024).⁶
4. Our responses to some of those consultations and Inquiries can be found here:

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/44798/documents/222606/default/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/curriculum-and-assessment-review>

³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8388/skills-for-the-future-apprenticeships-and-training/publications/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/invest-2035-the-uks-modern-industrial-strategy>

⁵ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8684/solving-the-send-crisis/publications/>

⁶ <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/skills-2030-building-world-class-skills-system>

- House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into ‘*Teacher recruitment, training and retention*’ (May 2024): <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12982/Teacher-recruitment-training-and-retention-inquiry>
 - The Policy Connect ‘Skills 2030: Building a World-Class Skills System’ Inquiry: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14210/Policy-Connect-Skills-2030-evidence-Nov-23/pdf/UCU_Policy_Connect_-_Skills_2030_evidence_-_Nov_23.pdf
 - House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee Inquiry into ‘Skills for the future: apprenticeships and training’: www.ucu.org.uk/media/14685/Inquiry-into-Skills-for-the-future-apprenticeships-and-training-UCU-response/pdf/UCU_response_-_Skills_for_the_future_Inquiry_-_House_of_Lords_-_October_2024.pdf
5. We recognise the attempts over the last few years to investigate the skills shortage⁷ in the economy through consultations and inquiries – some under the last Conservative government and some under the current Labour government. However, those efforts, especially under the previous government, have often been piecemeal and fragmented in nature. We therefore welcome the Committee’s Inquiry into FE and Skills under one umbrella, for a more ‘joined-up’ and cohesive approach.
 6. We also note that,⁸ the skills shortage in England is, in significant part, due to insufficient investment in post-16 education. Given the well established correlation between public investment in skills and economic productivity, there is no question that such neglect of FE does damage well beyond the sector itself. **Analysis by the Institute for Financial Studies (IFS) has found that between 2010-11 and 2022-23, total funding for all 16-19 education fell by almost a quarter.**⁹
 7. Even taking into account the recent additional funding for 2024-25, total 16-19 education funding is around 11% lower per student than it was in 2010-11.¹⁰ Overall public spending on adult skills and apprenticeships in England in 2024 was nearly a quarter lower than in 2009-10.¹¹ A Chamber of Commerce survey found that 62% of organisations in the UK faced skills shortage in 2024 (down from 71% and 73% respectively in 2022 and 2023).¹² FE teaching vacancy rates for the last available data (2022-23) run at around 5%.¹³ That is to say; there is a shortage of FE teachers – of up to about 13% in some subjects and regions. FE colleges, as individually incorporated FE corporations, cannot compete with industry for staff when it comes to pay. A 2023 piece of research by the IFS found¹⁴ that college teachers’ pay had declined by 18% in real terms since 2010-11.¹⁵ **The National**

⁷ For skills shortage, see, for instance: https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/The_Open_University_Business_Barometer_2024.pdf

⁸ See, for instance, <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/IFS-Green-Budget-2023-Investment-in-training-and-skills.pdf> and https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/The_Open_University_Business_Barometer_2024.pdf

⁹ <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/IFS-REPORT-EDUCATION-SPENDING-2024-2025.1.pdf>

¹⁰ IFS 2025 [Graduate labour market statistics, Calendar year 2023 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

¹¹ [Why 2025 is a critical year for FE funding | Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

¹² https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/The_Open_University_Business_Barometer_2024.pdf

¹³ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-workforce>

¹⁴ <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/What-has-happened-to-college-teacher-pay-in-England.pdf>

¹⁵ This is a combined figure for FE colleges and Sixth Form colleges.

Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)¹⁶ found that FE teachers earn nearly 25% less than schoolteachers. The IFS research, moreover, found that in 2010-11, the average starting salary (in today's prices) for a college lecturer was around £34,000, whereas by 2022-23, it had decreased to around £29,000¹⁷ The ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings figures¹⁸ show that in 2021, FE teachers earned 11% less than in industry. Indeed, UCU research¹⁹ found that some FE lecturers could leave the sector for jobs in industry paying around £20,000 more than the FE sector. This lies at the root of the recruitment and retention crisis facing the sector.

8. IFS forecasts²⁰ show that to simply maintain real-terms funding per student at current levels, the government would need to increase funding by almost £200 million every year for the remainder of this Parliament. From the other contextual data and evidence, however, it is clear that standing still would be far from sufficient for recruiting and retaining the staff. The sector needs to deliver the upskilling we need to renew Britain socially and economically. An estimated 60,000 additional 16-18 year-old students are expected to enter the sector by 2028.²¹
9. The OECD recognises²² that investments in education enhance labour productivity, which can lead to social development and economic growth. It is our contention that the economy has been weakened due to insufficient investment in education.
10. One of our key messages to the previous government in relation to post-16 education provision for the economy, was the need for strategic investment in FE and pay parity with schoolteachers for lecturers delivering skills education and training. Our key message remains unchanged: **the further education sector must be sufficiently funded, with better pay and conditions for the teachers/lecturers, to attract and retain staff to supply skills to the economy.**
11. There have been numerous Inquiries into further education and skills and related matters over the last few years, with insufficient resulting action. These are some of the recommendations in the Policy Connect report, '*Skills 2030: Building a World-Class Skills System*':²³
 - The Department for Education should deliver a new Further Education Workforce Strategy. The strategy should:
 - Include a Plan to increase the attractiveness of pay, contracts, and workload in the sector;
 - Introduce a Workload Reduction Taskforce for Further Education.

¹⁶ <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/building-a-stronger-fe-college-workforce-how-improving-pay-and-working-conditions-can-help-support-fe-college-teacher-supply/>

¹⁷ [What has happened to college teacher pay in England? | Institute for Fiscal Studies](#)

¹⁸ [Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings \(ASHE\) - Office for National Statistics](#)

¹⁹ [UCU - New report exposes severe financial insecurity for college staff](#)

²⁰ <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/why-2025-critical-year-fe-funding>

²¹ <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/why-2025-critical-year-fe-funding>

²² www.oecd.org/en/publications/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en/full-report.html

²³ [Skills 2030: Building A World-Class Skills System | Policy Connect](#)

FE teachers require parity of pay with schoolteachers and the best way to achieve that is through national collective agreements. Whilst we welcome the introduction of the Employment Rights Bill, we are disappointed that it is silent on sectoral collective bargaining. We implore the Committee to recommend that the government gets serious about instituting an effective, and binding, national bargaining structure for FE.

12. In summary, our key recommendations for an improved FE and skills sector are reflected in our campaign, a New Deal for FE:²⁴

- A multi-year investment and a workforce strategy in Further Education and Adult and Community Education (ACE)
- A new national bargaining framework for Further Education
- National pay outcomes to be fully funded and fully implemented by colleges
- Starting pay parity between FE teachers and schoolteachers in England.
- An agreed three-year investment plan to close the pay gap with schoolteachers pay.
- Reform of the National Joint Forum in FE to include national workload agreements.
- As the devolution of funding to the combined authorities and mayors increases, UCU to be recognised as the voice of the profession in ACE and consulted on regional skills and education plans, teachers' pay and terms and conditions.

²⁴ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/NewDealForFE>

Delivering FE

13. Funding for FE, including whether the additional £300 million announced by the Chancellor in last year's Budget is sufficient and how it should be distributed

It is an important question that the Inquiry asks in relation to the £300 million, especially as the Chancellor did not consult with Further Education sector stakeholders before the Budget.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) FE funding analysis and forecast²⁵

The IFS analysis is that the £300 million increase for further education colleges and sixth form colleges announced in the 2024 Autumn Budget will only maintain per student funding at current levels, in real terms, once inflation and the rising number of students are taken into account. The IFS forecasts that to maintain funding per student at current levels, in real terms, the government would need to increase annual funding by almost £200 million in today's prices by 2027-28. Not doing this would be equivalent to a 4% reduction in per-student funding.

Funding – some of the details

Further education colleges: between the start of the public spending cuts in 2010-11 and 2022-23, total funding for all 16-19 education has fallen by almost a quarter. Between 2010-11 and 2019-20, college spending per student declined by 14%, which brought per-student spending back to around the same level as in 2004-5.²⁶ Whilst additional funding was given to the FE sector between 2019-20 and 2024-5, college funding (encompassing both further education and sixth-form colleges) for 2024-25 is around 11% lower per student than it was in 2010-11.²⁷

Adult education and skills: IFS research found a similar pattern to FE funding in adult education and skills funding.²⁸ The research found that total spending on adult skills and apprenticeships is, in real terms, around 23% below 2009-10 levels, with classroom-based adult education funding over 40% lower than it was in 2009-10. Alongside the funding reductions, learner numbers have declined by 60% over the same period.

Growth in the student population

Since 2018, the number of 16-18-year-olds has grown 13%, by 230,000. A further 5% increase is anticipated by 2028, meaning an extra 60,000 students in colleges and sixth form colleges by 2028²⁹. The implications of this is that colleges will need to recruit more staff and increase facilities, which will require increased funding.

14. The effectiveness of current funding arrangements in tackling the attainment gap in FE

²⁵ <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/why-2025-critical-year-fe-funding>

²⁶ <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/IFS-REPORT-EDUCATION-SPENDING-2024-2025.1.pdf>

²⁷ IFS 2025 [Graduate labour market statistics, Calendar year 2023 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

²⁸ <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/why-2025-critical-year-fe-funding>

²⁹ <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/why-2025-critical-year-fe-funding>

UCU is a union that represents post-16 education staff therefore we do not collate data relating to students.

15. Workforce pressures, including college teachers' pay and the recruitment and retention of staff in all FE settings

There are two major issues relating to the recruitment and retention of FE staff: low salaries and high workload.³⁰

Salaries

There has been a sharp decline in FE salaries in England since 2010. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)³¹ found that FE teachers earn nearly 25% less than schoolteachers.

Why low pay is a problem

Since the FE sector was taken out of local authority control in 1992, college leaders in England have had the autonomy to set the pay levels of their staff. However, college leaders' decisions on staff pay are not based on the non-binding outcomes of the National Joint Forum (NJF). Association of Colleges (AoC) pay recommendations are not fully funded and not implemented by the majority of colleges.

This differs from the school sector, where the pay of schoolteachers is set nationally by the government based on recommendations by the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB).³² Pay offers are funded and universally implemented.

At a national level in England, the NJF has failed on pay. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the respective pay review mechanisms and their outcomes mean that starting salaries for FE teacher in England are the lowest, while the gap between schoolteachers' pay and FE pay in England is the largest, marking England out as the negative exception.

The consequences of low pay

Staff turnover

There is a high rate of staff turnover in colleges. IFS research found³³ the following:

Rate of staff turnover in colleges compared to schools		
	Colleges	Schools
After 1 year	25%	15%
After 3 years	50%	25%
After 10-years	75%	40%

³⁰ See generally House of Commons Education Committee report 'Teacher recruitment, training and retention' (2024): [Teacher recruitment, training and retention](#)

³¹ <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/building-a-stronger-fe-college-workforce-how-improving-pay-and-working-conditions-can-help-support-fe-college-teacher-supply/>

³² The pay of schoolteachers is set nationally by the government based on recommendations by the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB); for the first time, in 2024 UCU were invited to make submissions to the STRB

³³ www.ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/State-of-college-finances-in-England.pdf

Therefore, about half of college teachers leave the profession within three years of starting, compared to about a quarter of schoolteachers. IFS research attribute that attrition rate to pay.³⁴

Low number of teachers entering the FE sector

More teaching staff are set to retire from the sector than are entering it, which puts remaining teachers under increased pressure while stretching already oversized classes. In turn, there is significant detriment to the quality of further education and skills training. The DfE's 2022-23 FE Workforce Data Collection³⁵ found the following in relation to teachers in general FE colleges:

- Fewer than 2% (1.7%) are under 25
- 7% of those who teach in general FE colleges are age 25 – 29
- 21.5% are age 30-39
- 24% are age 40-49
- 28.5% are age 50-59
- 16.5% are age 60+

Workload

The House of Commons Education Committee report, '*Teacher recruitment, training and retention*'³⁶ found that workload is a significant factor impacting teacher retention. The UCU workload survey³⁷ shows that on average, FE staff work the equivalent of two working days per week for free.

There are a number of factors that contribute to making workload a greater problem in colleges than in schools. For example, unlike schools or sixth form colleges, there are no national agreements in FE covering maximum annual teaching hours, maximum weekly teaching hours, protected non-contact time or the length of the academic year.

UCU research found that FE staff work an average of two unpaid days per week (49FTE hours).³⁸ UCU FE members, who are full-time FE teachers, inform us that they are regularly asked to teach 28-hours or more a week, whereas it is understood that schoolteachers generally teach for 21-23 hours a week. We also hear testimony of average class sizes in colleges being 19, compared to around 11 in school sixth forms. These numbers are forecast to increase with a growth in the student population. The significance of these figures is that the larger the class size, the more work e.g. marking work, there is for teachers to do; the more classes they have to teach, the less time they have to mark student work or to prepare for teaching. If public investment in FE is not massively increased, the crisis in the sector will continue to worsen: larger class sizes, higher workloads, more staff leaving the profession and ultimately, an exacerbation of the skills shortage hamstringing Britain.

³⁴ www.ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/What-has-happened-to-college-teacher-pay-in-England.pdf

³⁵ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/further-education-workforce>

³⁶ [Teacher recruitment, training and retention](#)

³⁷ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12905/UCU-workload-survey-2021-data-report/pdf/WorkloadReportJune22.pdf> and https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14643/UCU-workload-survey-2021-FE-report/pdf/UCU_Workload_Survey_FE_May24.pdf

³⁸ www.ucu.org.uk/media/12905/UCU-workload-survey-2021-data-report/pdf/WorkloadReportJune22.pdf?+January+2023+update

Solutions to the salary and workload issues

A short-term solution

A short-term measure that UCU and college leaders are calling for to increase funding is for colleges to be allowed to claim VAT relief, in the same way as sixth form schools.

Permanent solution

In the longer term, the further education sector needs a [New Deal](#) with a new national bargaining framework in England; starting salaries for FE teacher to be on a par with schoolteachers; increased funding for Adult and Community Education (ACE), together with national workload agreements. The Policy Connect recommendations in their report, '*Skills 2030: Building a World-Class Skills System*'³⁹ objectives. We acknowledge some of the benefits that the Employment Rights bill will bring to some employees; however, it is our submission that one of its weaknesses is that it is silent on sector collective bargaining agreements.

16. Funding arrangements for specialist colleges

UCU's area of expertise is in relation to FE colleges.

17. Quality of facilities and capital investment strategy

In 2022, the ONS decided to reclassify FE colleges from the NPISH/private sector classification and return to the public sector classification after 30-years. The key factor in the ONS decision was the sector's deficits, as many providers were in the red,⁴⁰ and as such lacked the funds to repair and maintain their college estates. The ONS reclassification decision paved the way for the Secretary of State for Education in 2023 to announce the FE capital transformation programme to construct new college buildings and upgrade existing ones. This course of events suggests that the FE Corporation governance model, making FE colleges independent incorporated legal entities, is not working effectively. We notice that the English Devolution bill does not propose to transfer the FE sector into the competence of Combined Mayoral Authorities, in the same way it does for Adult Education and Skills. We are of the opinion that this is a matter to be discussed.

³⁹ [Skills 2030: Building A World-Class Skills System | Policy Connect](#)

⁴⁰ According to the IFS, 37% of FE colleges in England reported to be in deficit in 2022-23, the latest year for which data is available: www.ifs.org.uk/articles/why-2025-critical-year-fe-funding

Skills and apprenticeships

18. How to resolve the skills shortage and narrow the gap between the skills that employers want and the skills that employees have

The first step: quantifying the skills shortage

The Department for Education publishes a biannual Employer Skills Survey, the last of which was published in 2023, covering the period 2022 (ESS 2022).⁴¹ The survey was a large-scale telephone survey, comprising interviews with 72,918 employers across the UK, 59,486 of them in England. The survey provides labour market information on the skills challenges faced by employers. Some of the survey's key findings are:

	2022	2017
Establishments with at least one vacancy	23%	20%
Percentage of establishments with at least one skill-shortage vacancy⁴²	10%	6%
Skill-shortage vacancy density (SSVs as a share of vacancies)	36%	22%
Percentage of establishments with at least one skill gap⁴³ (i.e. 1+ employee not fully proficient)	15%	13%
Skill gap density (the proportion of employees judged not fully proficient)	5.7%	4.4%

Around a quarter (23%) of all employers in the UK had vacancy at the time of the survey; one in ten (10%) had a skills-shortage vacancy. This represents an increase since 2017, when one in five (20%) employers had a vacancy and 6% had a skills-shortage vacancy. More than a third (36%) of all vacancies in 2022 were skill-shortage vacancies, compared to 22% in 2017. 15% of employers had at least one member of staff who was not fully proficient (i.e. a skills gap), slightly higher than in 2017 (13%). Overall, 5.7% of the workforce had a skills gap, compared to 4.4% in 2017.

The Policy Connect report, '*Skills 2030: Building a World-Class Skills System*,'⁴⁴ found that sectors across the economy have a skills shortage, with workers lacking the

⁴¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/employer-skills-survey/2022>. The next survey is due to be published in September 2025

⁴² A skills-shortage vacancy is a vacancy that is hard to fill due to a lack of skills, qualifications or experience among applicants

⁴³ A skills gap is where an employee is judged by their employer to lack full proficiency

⁴⁴ <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/skills-2030-building-world-class-skills-system>

necessary skills to fill vacancies. According to the report, the skills gap within UK manufacturing costs the economy around £8 billion annually in lost economic output.⁴⁵

The ‘green’ transition to net zero that is changing the economy’s skills demands

One of the biggest challenges we face is a shortage of the skills necessary for rapidly decarbonising our economy.⁴⁶ Further education colleges must be provided with the capital funding required to equip students for the green jobs of today and tomorrow. In the interest of the green transition, for learners, workers and the economy, it is important for government to ensure that there is a coherent and joined-up strategy across different green skills initiatives and government departments.⁴⁷

19. The level of collaboration between the FE sector, local government and employers in responding to skills shortage

Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) – inhibitors of progressive skills training?

The Conservative government introduced the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 (herein after referred to as the Skills Act). The Skills Act introduced the concept of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). The LSIPs are plans which are developed by a government-appointed employer representative body⁴⁸ for a specified area, such as a local Chamber of Commerce, to identify the skills that are or may be needed in local area.

The Act places a legal obligation on education providers, such as FE colleges, to co-operate with employer representative bodies to assist them to develop the LSIPs. Further, the Act places an obligation on education providers to “*have regard*” to their local LSIP when making any decisions relating to skills education and training – including when designing their education and skills offer. The Act, therefore, places numerous demands on education providers, without bestowing upon them any legal rights in the LSIP process, such as equality of status with the employers’ representative bodies.

Significantly, the statute makes no reference to the importance of the pedagogical voice of the education providers’ staff in the LSIP process. There is no obvious transparency regarding the work of the employer representative bodies, or as to what extent they invite education providers to take part in the LSIP process. This is a Conservative-era skills-development policy, which does not appear to have contributed to resolving the skills shortage.

It is our view that the pedagogical voice is an essential part of the LSIPs process.

20. The role of Skills England in meeting the government’s industrial strategy and boosting economic growth

⁴⁵ Policy Connect, ‘Upskilling Industry: Manufacturing Productivity and Growth in England’, 25 October 2023, <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/upskilling-industry/manufacturing-productivity-and-growth-england>

⁴⁶ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/pulling-all-the-levers-tuc2023.pdf>

⁴⁷ See for instance: [Support for workers to benefit from thousands of clean power jobs - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/support-for-workers-to-benefit-from-thousands-of-clean-power-jobs)

⁴⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-employer-representative-bodies/notice-of-designated-employer-representative-bodies>

UCU supports the UK government's ambitions for economic growth, national renewal and the expansion of opportunity. Skills England has a crucial role in joining up the skills, industrial and workforce strategies to this end. Further Education is a crucial factor in delivering the skills and education for post-16 and adult learners that the growth agenda will be built on. There must be sustained investment and a New Deal for FE.⁴⁹

21. Current challenges for apprenticeships, including employer engagement, funding issues, and apprentice pay

Apprenticeship challenges linked to challenges in the FE sector

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, but that this was due to difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers in apprenticeship-related subjects. The college concerned was in Coventry South. The local MP succeeded in getting a Westminster Hall debate on the wider issue of school and college funding in the Midlands.⁵⁰ Around the same time, the House of Commons Education Select Committee were conducting an Inquiry into 'Teacher recruitment, training and retention' (including FE teachers). They published their findings in May 2024,⁵¹ welcoming the introduction of a £30k starting salary for schoolteachers and alluded to the same for further education teachers. Simultaneously, Policy Connect published their report, 'Skills 2030: Building a World-Class Skills System', 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.

22. The role of devolution in addressing regional skills needs and apprenticeships

Whilst the Adult Education Budget (AEB) is devolved to the Combined Mayoral Authorities, the Further Education budget remains with the DfE. We note that whilst the government's policy in relation to the AEB is for increased devolution,⁵² it is for continued centralised control of the FE budget.⁵³ We are of the view that the strengths and weakness of both options should be explored comprehensively, and in consultation with UCU and other union stakeholders.

A related matter that that we are concerned about is the decline in Adult Education funding. Since 2010, there has been a fall of nearly 25% in adult skills and apprenticeship funding. Classroom-based adult education funding is 40-50% lower than in 2009-10. Student enrolment has reduced in conjunction with the funding reductions, dropping by 50% over the same period.⁵⁴ Adult and Community Education (ACE), wherever and

⁴⁹ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/NewDealForFE>

⁵⁰ <https://parliamentlive.tv/event/index/5f453dae-9d7e-4515-9e01-7f71b4ac09b4>

⁵¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/44798/documents/222606/default/>

⁵² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

⁵³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

⁵⁴ <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/why-2025-critical-year-fe-funding>

however it is delivered, has a critical role to play in enabling pathways for adults back into education, new skills and employment. Funding must be increased.

23. The quality and availability of work placements within vocational courses

UCU is a union that represents post-16 education staff therefore we are unable to comment on this matter.

The Curriculum and qualifications in FE

24. The post-16 curriculum

The government commissioned a ‘*Curriculum and assessment review*’ very soon after taking office in July 2024. The Review is due to report in 2025. Part of the Review’s aims is to “*ensure meaningful, rigorous and high-value pathways for all at 16-19*”. We strongly support that aim. We believe that our curriculum and qualifications system needs to be broad and balanced with credit accumulation and transferability to ensure all learning is properly recognised and valued.

A broad-based education and training offer in further education colleges is in the interests of us all. Some school pupils, who struggle at school go on to perform well academically in further education, having been given new opportunities e.g. through BTECs or A Levels. This could be for a plethora of reasons e.g. pupils learning in their second language may take longer to learn than others. That is to say: further education colleges have a crucial role to play in widening participation and should not be limited to the narrow confines of vocations. Further education should be about opportunities for progression, whether they be vocational or academic, being open to everyone. It is important for the government’s post-16 education strategy to be founded on a recognition of the reality that what is in the educational interests of individual learners is also in the economic interests of the whole country.⁵⁵

25. The assessment system

UCU’s position on the assessment system is that teachers’ professional judgement should be valued and given a central role in assessments. Coursework must be an integral part of assessment.

26. Driving better standards in FE; the quality and consistency of provision and outcomes

FE Funding

Government funding has a direct impact on standards and the quality and consistency of provision and outcomes in FE. However, between 2010-11 and 2022-23, total funding for all 16-19 education has fallen by almost a quarter. Between 2010-11 and 2019-20, college spending per student declined by 14%, which brought per-student spending back to around the same level as in 2004-5.⁵⁶ Whilst additional funding was given to the FE sector between 2019-20 and 2024-5, college funding (encompassing both further education and sixth-form colleges) for 2024-25 is around 11% lower per student than it was in 2010-11.⁵⁷

OFSTED

⁵⁵ See for instance www.adruk.org/our-mission/our-impact/the-impact-of-higher-education-on-labour-market-earnings/

⁵⁶ <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/IFS-REPORT-EDUCATION-SPENDING-2024-2025.1.pdf>

⁵⁷ IFS 2025 [Graduate labour market statistics, Calendar year 2023 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

In February 2025, OFSTED launched a consultation⁵⁸ on its inspection process. The current inspection framework and its operation does not have the confidence of the profession. In the FE sector, single word assessments remain in use (unlike in schools) and they are a source of high levels of stress and anxiety for many members. UCU has a policy of calling for the abolition of OFSTED inspections and instead, replacing them with a peer-led model of review.⁵⁹

27. Post-16 numeracy and literacy, including GCSE re-sits

We recognise that the previous government made it a condition of funding for further education colleges that 16-18-year olds must achieve maths and English at grade 4. This means that if students had not achieved a GCSE at grade 4 in maths and English, they were forced to re-sit them, alongside their chosen course(s).

We recognise the importance of maths and English skills for individuals; we also recognise the importance of giving students every opportunity to develop these skills. UCU members are dedicated to supporting the teaching of functional maths and English, as well as enabling students to successfully re-sit GCSE. However, education experts have found that a policy of forced re-sits is punitive and unnecessary in some cases. Whilst it is true that some students can benefit from re-sitting some exams, similar outcomes can be achieved with a voluntary approach. The policy of forced re-sits keeps some students, who may feel like failures in the first place, locked in a cycle of perpetual failure, which causes psychological harm to these students, keeping them away from what they do best and stopping them progressing educationally. UCU's position on compulsory GCSE re-sits is therefore that they should be abolished and replaced with a voluntary, non-punitive approach.

28. The strengths and weaknesses of T Levels and the main qualifications option for students wishing to pursue a technical route into FE

T Levels, unlike BTECs, are not a tried-and-tested route of widening participation to higher education. T Levels were originally designed as a route into skills employment. Some HE providers have confirmed that they will consider T Levels for entry on to at least one course;⁶⁰ however T Levels are not a guaranteed pathway to higher education. Our policy is for a range of options to be available for learners post-16: A Levels, BTECs, T Levels and apprenticeships.

29. The reform of level 3 qualifications

UCU is a part of the Protect Student Choice campaign, led by the Sixth Form Colleges Association, to retain BTECs. The campaign's concern is that replacing the current three-route model of Level 3 qualifications (A levels, BTECs and technical qualifications) with a two-route model (A levels and T levels) will remove an effective and well-established pathway to higher education.⁶¹ **Research by the Social Market Foundation found that 44% of white working-class students that enter university studied at least one BTEC**

⁵⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/improving-the-way-ofsted-inspects-education>

⁵⁹ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14407/Ofsted-A-Culture-of-Fear-and-Anxiety/pdf/UCU_Culture_of_fear_report_May24.pdf

⁶⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/t-level-resources-for-universities>

⁶¹ <https://www.protectstudentchoice.org/>

and 37% of Black students enter with only BTEC qualifications.⁶² De-funding BTECs will further disadvantage already-disadvantaged students. It will also reverse progress made in widening participation. Research has found that graduates have better employment outcomes than non-graduates, with more in employment than non-graduates and earning more than non-graduates.⁶³ Research by ADR UK found that “*on average, increased tax revenues from undergraduate degrees more than make up for the cost they incur for the taxpayer*”.⁶⁴ It is, therefore, not only in the interest of individuals and widening participation to continue to fund BTECs; it would also be economically damaging to proceed with their defunding.

⁶² <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/the-role-of-vocational-routes-into-higher-education/>

⁶³ [Higher education: Contribution to the economy and levelling up - House of Lords Library](#) and www.adruk.org/our-mission/our-impact/the-impact-of-higher-education-on-labour-market-earnings/

⁶⁴ www.adruk.org/our-mission/our-impact/the-impact-of-higher-education-on-labour-market-earnings/

Supporting young people, widening access, and narrowing the attainment gap

30. The difficulties facing FE students, including mental health issues and access to mental health support, and cost of living pressures

UCU is a union that represents post-16 education staff therefore we do not collate data relating to students. We do, however, note the availability of the Education Maintenance (EMA) that is available in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, but was withdrawn in England in 2010.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/short-and-long-run-effects-education-maintenance-allowance>

Conclusion

31. Thank you for considering our submission. It is time for a New Deal for FE⁶⁶ in the interest of the sector as a whole, which entails:

- A multi-year investment and a workforce strategy in Further Education and Adult and Community Education
- A new national bargaining framework for Further Education
- National pay outcomes to be fully funded and fully implemented by colleges
- Starting pay parity between FE teachers and schoolteachers in England.
- An agreed three-year investment plan to close the pay gap with schoolteachers pay.
- Reform of the National Joint Forum in FE to include national workload agreements.
- As the devolution of funding to the combined authorities and mayors increases, UCU to be recognised as the voice of the profession in ACE and consulted on regional skills and education plans, teachers' pay and terms and conditions.

32. We would welcome the opportunity to have further dialogue with the Inquiry Committee and would be eager to offer oral evidence.

Jo Grady
UCU General Secretary

⁶⁶ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/NewDealForFE>