

University and College Union

Higher Education Branch Action Note

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To	Branch and Local association secretaries
Topic	National Negotiators' Report to UCU Higher Education Sector Conference, 25 May 2025
Action	To consider the national negotiators report and recommendations and circulate to members.
Summary	<p>This Branch Action Note provides the negotiators report on the New JNCHES negotiations which took place since the last Congress report circulated in May 2024. It covers actions relating to the ongoing dispute concerning the 2024/25 JNCHES negotiations and the joint union claim for 2025/26.</p> <p>Please note as negotiations are currently ongoing, a further update will be provided after the conclusion of the final meeting of New JNCHES on 15th May 2025.</p>
Contact	Shahenda Suliman, Head of Higher Education

National Negotiator' Report to UCU Higher Education Sector Conference, 25 May 2025

1. Background

- 1.1 Negotiations for the 2025/26 pay round took place against a backdrop of widespread proposed redundancies across higher education. Taking this into account, our asks for this year reflected both pay, the pay-related elements (elsewhere referred to as 'Four Fights'), and the need to agree an emergency package to avoid redundancies. We also called on UCEA to work with the joint unions to lobby government(s) to implement more stable funding for higher education, with the aim of avoiding redundancies and course closures.
- 1.2 Delegates will be aware of UCEA's full and final offer for the 2024/25 year.¹ Whilst UCU accepted the terms of reference for the four pay-related items (contract

¹ This is available here: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14596/240827-Appendix---UCEA-final-offer/pdf/240827_Appendix_-_UCEA_final_offer.pdf

types/casualisation, pay spine reform, workload, and equality pay gaps), the pay offer was rejected. Unison and EIS similarly rejected the offer, and Unison opted to ballot members in selected institutions over the pay element. In December, UCU's HEC voted to ballot members over the 2024/25 offer, with the intention of undertaking UK-wide term-time strike action before the Easter break.

- 1.3 Following this HEC, HE Officers were informed that this timeline was not feasible, and a special HEC was requisitioned by a majority of HEC members. Alternative timelines and proposals were put forward at this special HEC which took place in February 2025. At this meeting, HEC voted to undertake pre-emptive planning for a potential industrial action ballot (for industrial action to take place early in semester 1) for consideration at a BDM, to inform decisions at a special HEC to take a final decision on balloting. In April, HEC called for a BDM to be held within 2-3 weeks of HE sector conference "to discuss motions proposing industrial action".
- 1.4 Negotiations for the 2025/26 pay round commenced on 31 March 2025. UCEA's current position is that it will not enter talks on the four pay-related items unless the unions agree not to undertake industrial action for the 2025/26 year. The joint unions' position is that this is unacceptable and that UCEA should not be holding up negotiations on jointly agreed ToRs as a bargaining chip. Moreover as we are still in talks, it would be premature to agree our response to UCEA's final offer without having concluded negotiations, or without even knowing what this final offer is.

2. New JNCHES negotiations 2025/26

2.1 Our joint union pay claim for 2025/26 included the following:

Pay

- an increase on all pay points of at least RPI + 3.5% or a flat rate of at least £2,500 (whichever is greater) and a commitment to restore lost pay.
- Equivalent rises to London Weighting and any other allowances.
- A new minimum pay rate of £15 an hour.
- All institutions to become Foundation Living Wage employers and pay points below the FLW to be deleted.
- UCEA committing to a comprehensive reform of the pay spine

Job cuts and course closures

The unions call on UCEA to undertake further joint work to halt redundancies and course closures. Specifically, to:

- a) Explore an emergency package in relation to redundancy avoidance.
- b) Work with the joint unions to lobby government to implement more stable funding for the higher education sector, with a view to avoiding redundancies, course closures and cuts to academic disciplines. This should include a return to a system of block grants based on capped student numbers.

Pay-related elements (casualisation/contract types, workload, equality pay gaps, pay spine reform)

UCEA and the joint unions made progress in the 2024/5 pay negotiation on agreeing terms of reference for working groups to develop joint agreements on: workload, contract types/casualisation, pay spine reform, and action to tackle equality pay gaps. The offer to take this work forward was subsequently withdrawn by UCEA. We believe that these issues still need addressing and that the proposed working groups should be reconvened at the earliest opportunity.

Pensions

We call upon the JNCHES Pensions Forum to form a working party to gather data on the extent of pensions gaps in the schemes for HE workers, with the aim of producing concrete proposals which would act to reduce gender and other inequality pension gaps in the sector.

35 hour week

The joint trade unions believe that New JNCHES can show leadership for the sector in response to this claim by developing national guidance on moving staff onto 35-hour weekly. Addressing this will go a significant way towards eliminating poverty pay in the sector as well as impacting on workloads.

A national Green New Deal Agreement on a Just Transition for the sector which will include a Just Transition Commission in Higher Education

UCEA to commit to the protection of national agreements relating to terms and conditions of employment including the Post-92 national contract and HE2000

There is growing evidence of individual employers moving beyond the terms and conditions laid down in the Post-92 Contract, accompanying Framework Agreement, and HE2000. In particular, the employment of staff on inferior terms and conditions and inappropriate pay grades.

We call on UCEA to call on its members publicly to support the agreed terms and conditions of HE staff laid down in the Post-92 Contract, accompanying Framework Agreement, and HE2000 and to ensure that HE employers abide by these agreements.

Establish the Scottish sub-committee of New JNCHES as set out under the New JNCHES agreement.

Call upon universities to reimburse all visa application and application-adjacent fees for migrant workers and ensure that the pay spine is appropriate for the new government-mandated pay thresholds for skilled worker visas.

2.2 The joint union side is made up of UCU, Unison, Unite, EIS, and the GMB.

- 2.3 At the time of writing, there have been two New JNCHES meetings, with the first held on 31 March and the second on 16 April 2025. UCEA's opening offer on 31 March was a pay uplift of 1%. In the second meeting, UCEA offered 1.2%. This percentage would be applied to all pay points. UCEA also indicated that they could recommend that their Board approve a 1.4% uplift and deletion of the bottom two points of the pay scale.
- 2.4 The joint unions made clear that we could not in any circumstances recommend any pay offer below RPI, asked the UCEA negotiators to report this to the UCEA board and urged them to come back with a pay offer which was RPI+ for the meeting on 15 May.
- 2.5 The third and final New JNCHES meeting is scheduled to take place on 15 May 2025. We will share an update shortly after this meeting takes place, as we anticipate we will receive a final offer then.
- 2.6 The parties have agreed that we want to produce a joint statement on HE funding to be agreed at next JNCHES meeting on 15 May and then submitted to Government in advance of the spending review in June.
- 2.7 At the meeting on 16 April 2025, the joint unions made clear that both short-term and longer-term interventions were required to stabilise sector finances. The unions emphasised the need to protect both jobs and local/regional economies from irreparable damage, and also highlighted the importance of access to higher education across all subject areas. We argued for a fairer and more sustainable distribution of resources with respect to both teaching and research, and reiterated our opposition to barriers to international students coming to the UK. UCEA expressed a desire for any joint statement to be aligned with the GuildHE and UUK submissions to the Comprehensive Spending Review.²
- 2.8 The parties have agreed to joint work on updating the 'Digest on Job Security' (last updated 2021). The joint unions emphasised that we wish to see this include a statement which makes clear that all parties believe protecting jobs, experience, and expertise in the sector is an absolute priority.
- 2.9 We are disappointed that at the time of writing, UCEA have yet to engage further with the unions over a draft statement on funding, draft text on redundancies, or a revised pay offer in advance of the meeting on 15 May.
- 2.10 We are also disappointed that UCEA are refusing to progress talks on crucial pay-related elements on the basis of jointly agreed terms of reference unless the unions agree not to enter an industrial dispute (industrial action) over an offer that we have not even received. We do not believe that issues such as equality pay gaps and precarity should be used as a bargaining chip if UCEA are serious about their claims that these are issues they care about tackling as employers, especially given we have already reached joint agreement on these areas of work.
- 2.11 We will continue to seek to address the issue of redundancies in the sector, pay, and working conditions as part of these talks and as part of a total package.

² Available here: <https://guildhe.ac.uk/news-and-policy-insights/submission-comprehensive-spending-review>; <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/our-submission-comprehensive-spending>.

3. The position of the other unions

- 3.1 Of the five New JNCHES unions, UCU and Unison were the two that voted to ballot for industrial action over the 2024/25 pay round. Unison's ballot was over the pay element and closed on 4 March 2025. Unison reported that its members voted 75% in favour of strike action, however as only a small number of branches achieved a turnout in excess of 50%, Unison decided not to undertake industrial action at this point over the 2024/25 offer.

Please note that as negotiations are currently ongoing in relation to the offer for 2025/26, a revised version will be submitted following the final meeting of New JNCHES on 15 May which includes an update on these areas and associated commentary.

4. Recommendations

1. The National Negotiators recommend that UCU:
 - a. Continue to pursue progress in all areas of the 2025-26 claim.
 - b. Continue to pursue progress on joint initiatives which will lead to an alternative HE funding model.
 - c. Continue to pursue progress on job security urgent measures.

As part of the update following the final meeting of this new JNCHES talks, the negotiators may propose additional recommendations.

UCU National Negotiators 2024-25

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ACTION REQUIRED: branches are asked to consider the report and recommendations and circulate to members.