



## **Joint FE trade union statement on the Association of Colleges (AoC) recommendation on pay and conditions claim 2025/26**

The joint trade unions met with the college employers' representatives from the AoC on 17 September for the second meeting under the National Joint Forum agreement (NJF). The meeting was organised in order that the AoC could make a pay recommendation, which they had failed to do when the NJF met in June. The trade unions were also expecting further clarification on other elements in the joint claim.

The joint trade union pay claim submitted in April can be found here:

[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/15006/2526-FE-pay-claim-FINAL-with-logos/pdf/2526\\_FE\\_pay\\_claim\\_FINAL\\_with\\_logos.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/15006/2526-FE-pay-claim-FINAL-with-logos/pdf/2526_FE_pay_claim_FINAL_with_logos.pdf)

The outcome of the first NJF meeting in June can be found here:

[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/15200/202506-FE-England-joint-union-statement-on-pay-negotiations/pdf/202506\\_FE\\_England\\_joint\\_union\\_statement\\_on\\_pay\\_negotiations.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/15200/202506-FE-England-joint-union-statement-on-pay-negotiations/pdf/202506_FE_England_joint_union_statement_on_pay_negotiations.pdf)

The AoC offer on pay and related matters can be found at **Appendix 1** below.

Our evaluation of the offer is that it is disappointing and doesn't move us nearer the sector levels changes we need in FE.

On pay the recommendation of 4% for those colleges that can afford it will make little difference to staff working in FE who have in recent years endured low pay awards and seen their pay fall further behind staff working in schools and sixth form colleges. For the lowest paid staff, a 4% increase will be negligible, and the recommendation fails to address the compression of pay, particularly at the lower end of the scale. We need ring fenced investment on pay to close the pay gap that means all colleges are obliged to pay the increase.

We desperately need fully funded and binding national pay bargaining in FE.

All staff need a pay rise and the joint unions' view is that all staff should get at least 4% and those employers that can pay more should pay more. There should

also be an underpin to ensure a meaningful pay increase for the lowest paid staff.

On national bargaining, we need binding pay outcomes and a new sector level negotiating and funding framework that establishes a level playing field on pay. Talks outside the NJF with the AoC on this issue have stalled. We need to get around the table and start to scope out the issues and make progress. The current national level process is failing all sides and gives the impression to those outside the sector that because the NJF exists we must have functioning national pay machinery. We do not.

On living wage accreditation, our core position is that the NJF should have a reasonable expectation that all employers would be accredited. The lack of accreditation reflects badly on the sector.

On workload, the working group set up two years ago has stalled and it is some way off concluding its work and making some recommendations. We need national agreements like other parts of education to regulate excessive hours and protect staff wellbeing.

The joint trade unions welcome the AoC offer of joint work on FE funding and on seeking to reverse the cuts to adult skills funding. Combining our efforts and taking the case directly to government makes sense. We look forward to developing this work with the AoC.

Overall, it's another disappointing outcome to a very unsatisfactory process.

## Appendix 1

### Final Claim Employer side response NJF2 17 September 2025

#### Pay

At NJF1 in June we asked for a delay in our negotiations to September to give ourselves more time to understand the impact of the increased funding in 16-19 budgets which was only announced in June, at the Spending Review. Over the summer we have engaged our members to get a fuller picture of the impact of that funding increase.

At our first meeting, we also clearly set out that we recognised the expectation from government on colleges is to use the additional funding most received to address pay. We also recognise that the pay gap between college lecturers and schoolteachers is still unacceptable and needs to close.

Our analysis shows us that many colleges - those with a large proportion of income from 16-19 funding - will be able to use the recent rate increase to improve the pay award they were budgeting for. Many colleges will be able to match the 4% pay award made for schoolteachers for all college staff (noting that for non-teaching staff in schools, the pay award was less than 4%).

There is a small group of colleges with no or very small 16-19 budgets. For this group, their main public income stream is from the Adult Skills Fund, which has been cut again this year by up to 6%. The challenge for them is to maintain staffing and remain financially viable, so pay awards are very difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Between these two groups is a group of colleges where 4% will be unachievable. The cut to the Adult Skills Fund is part of the reason, but variously they will be challenged by a range of other factors, including:

- The lack of funding increases for apprenticeships
- The rise in National Insurance employer payments being higher than the DfE additional funding (the range for compensation is between 50% and 85%)
- The need to pay heed to the FE Commissioner benchmarks for cash and pay as a proportion of turnover
- Significant reductions in Teachers Pension Scheme funding from DfE

Once again, college leaders find themselves in a difficult position, of wanting and needing to improve pay to compete better with schools and industry, but without sufficient funds to be able to do so. The extra funding announced in the spending review was very welcome, but it fell short of what is needed for every college to be able to start to close the pay gap with schools.

Our recommendation for this year is based, due to the reasons mentioned, on affordability and the desire to match the STRB recommendation and schoolteachers pay increase. The recommendation is in three parts:

**We recommend that colleges should make a make an award of 4% for 2025/26 for all staff, where their financial circumstances and funding allocations allow them to do so.**

**We recommend the government acknowledge the challenges faced by colleges and the reasons why some may not be able to pay the recommended award. We urge the unions to support us in highlighting to government that:**

- For a small group of colleges, any pay award might be impossible this year, given the cuts to adult funding and the other factors set out above;

- Many colleges will not be able to reach 4% because of the factors outlined above;
- Some colleges may exceed the 4%, showing that college leaders are serious about improving pay and conditions however and whenever they can;

Thirdly, we strongly recommend that the unions join with us this autumn to campaign for better funding for adult education. We know that the unions will agree with us that the current position on adult funding is untenable and ties the hands of some colleges in doing more on pay. Together, we can mount a national, credible campaign on this vital issue. Unless and until adult funding is improved, colleges will remain severely challenged in properly addressing the unacceptable pay gap with school teachers and industry.

#### **Foundation Living wage**

We encourage all Colleges to make the foundation living wage the lowest pay point for all staff. Where this is unaffordable for individual colleges, an explanation should be provided to local union representatives. We leave the question of accreditation to individual colleges.

#### **Demand to close the pay gap between FE and schoolteachers' pay within three years.**

We are all in agreement that the pay gap between FE lecturers and School teachers needs to be closed.

We therefore ask that the trade unions collaborate with us to lobby the government (and treasury) for additional funds to help close the pay gap. This may be an area we can work on as part of an independent review of college pay and the cost of teaching pay parity with schools.

#### **The minimum starting salary for an FE lecturer to be £30,000.**

We agree with the trade unions and believe that the starting salary for college lectures should at least match that of a schoolteacher.

This can only be achieved through joint lobbying and additional funding to help colleges achieve this.

#### **The AoC agree to time limited talks on the introduction of standardized increments and pay scales and**

#### **Agree a new national pay agreement in FE that has binding outcomes.**

A forum has already been established to explore these issues.

#### **A commitment to close gender, ethnic and disability pay gaps.**

We are committed to working the trade unions and HR practitioners in identifying how we can best collect, analyse, report and take appropriate action in closing the various pay gaps within the sector.

The items in the pay claim relating to **guided learning hours**, the **resourcing of more admin staff** and **class size recommendations** are outside of our negotiating remit. (The cost of some of these elements could be incorporated into the funding proposal).

#### **A set of agreed workload and wellbeing protocols**

We remain committed to joint working on the issue of workload and to sharing some of the excellent practice colleges developed to help reduce the workload burden for their staff.

We are aware that workload issues for colleges are high on the Secretary of State's Improving Education Together (IET) group. AoC are in the process of developing a workload toolkit on behalf of the sector as an action from previous negotiations and as an

issue raised by the IET group. The initial outline and development phases have been shared with officers

**A set of agreed boundaries for contacting staff by email or phone**

This is a notable example of an action many colleges are taking to help reduce workload and improve staff well being and is referenced within the workload toolkit.

**Staff to have access to two mental health days per year**

This aspect of the claim is outside of AoC's negotiating remit.

**Association of Colleges  
Employment Policy Group  
18 September 2025**