

11 November 2009

Kevin Brennan MP
Minister for Further Education, Skills, Apprenticeships and Consumer Affairs
BIS
1 Victoria Street
LONDON
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Dear Kevin

Cuts to FE

It was with some extraordinary consternation that I read Sunday's Observer article on the 'secret plan to axe spending on training for young people'.

I have since had sight of the paper the Observer article was based on and needless to say my immediate concern is with paragraph 7 'Impact on FE colleges and providers':

'As staff costs represent the most significant factor in a college budget, we would expect costs to be passed on in the form of pay freezes and/or redundancies; and potentially reduced volumes of learners.'

This is a travesty of any realistic commitment to tackling the current recession and allowing people genuine second chances of learning and re-skilling.

I have to say it was with real sadness that I read this. I believe that my members transform people's lives and particularly the lives of the most vulnerable within our society. To have them as the number one target for frontline cuts at a time when clearly you expect them to deliver 'volumes of learners more in line with the higher, pre-efficiency savings' is self-defeating.

You know from our recent discussions that although progress has been made over the last five years or so, FE lecturers' pay levels continue to be a running sore in the sector with salaries well below that of secondary schoolteachers. Freezing pay now will reverse the improvements and is likely to have a devastating impact on morale.

I was sincerely shocked that this paper intends to make cuts to the frontline and admitted that in 2010/11 there would be a loss of 133,000 places across the baseline.

In addition to my concern about protecting my members' jobs and pay, my union has serious concerns about other elements of this cuts package:

- Bearing down on providers with large Train to Gain funding and those who are responsible for significant provision on lower level 'Skills for Life' (as we have seen recently at Tower Hamlets College over access to ESOL provision). We believe this will disproportionately affect very vulnerable people especially in urban colleges.
- Bringing back employer co-funding for Train to Gain repeat level 2 qualifications would hit any serious attempts at re-skilling if employers refuse to pay.
- Putting up Minimum Performance Levels and applying them more stringently will be a quick and quiet way of making cuts. However, it will continue to hit colleges' ability to provide the kinds of programmes especially the unemployed need. We saw when Minimum Performance levels were raised for A-level courses, that this hit disproportionately those from poorer backgrounds who wanted to return to learning but had not got the requirement previously for five A*-C GCSEs.
- Reducing the Adult Safeguarded Learning budget by 10% - this will effectively slash at one stroke the sum put in by the Learning Revolution white paper - and again will hit the chances of those who most need it to have a stepping stone up to formal learning.
- Reducing by 10% the budget for apprenticeships for those over 25 - again putting a barrier in for adults wishing to re-skill.
- Reducing by £25 million the funds for the new Adult Advancement and Careers Service. IAG is recognised by all parties as essential for advancement up the educational ladder and was recognised post-Leitch as the vital link for adults to find new careers and qualifications.

The paper mentions more than once that the National Skills Strategy may impact on the balance of funding across different programmes. I would suggest that there needs to be urgent re-thinking with regard to protecting frontline services and jobs when the final Skills Investment Strategy is published alongside it.

In addition, I have to say that I am disappointed that these issues have come to light in this manner. The memo is dated 12 October and yet at the FE ministerial standing group on 20 October the scope of these proposed cuts was not aired in that meeting. Nor did we receive any warning from you at our meeting on 22 October that these sort of cuts were possible.

I would like to seek an urgent meeting with you to clarify the detail within the memo and seek assurances with regard to the protection of my members' pay and jobs.

Yours sincerely



Sally Hunt
General secretary