

Update on National Bargaining in the College Sector

Key Facts

- Less than 70 GMB members (out of a support staff workforce of over 4000) have voted to strike for additional pay.
- Both UNISON and GMB have announced their intention to hold a strike on **Tuesday 27 September 2016**, with further strikes anticipated towards the end of October 2016. This will be UNISON's second strike this month, which is clearly aimed at disrupting students' studies.
- UNISON has also advised that their members' will take part in "*continuous action short of strike action*" with effect from **Wednesday 28 September 2016**. This action shall consist of members not acting as fire wardens, first aiders or members of personal evacuation teams. There is no end date to this disruption. This action will impact our most vulnerable staff and students.
- Our priority remains to ensure that students' studies are affected as little as possible by the UNISON and GMB strike, but disruption will be unavoidable.
- Where possible colleges will seek to remain open to minimise impact on students. Only two colleges were closed during the last strike, but this was only thanks to the large amount of preparatory work undertaken by the colleges.
- We envisage all colleges will remain open during the period of the forthcoming strike action, albeit some campuses may have to close, though this will be continually assessed to ensure that health and safety and student welfare can be maintained to the highest standards.
- UNISON and GMB have rejected a reasonable pay offer, which exceeds Public Sector Pay Policy and provides a 3.6% pay increase over two years for employees earning £22,000.

Background

Following a decision by UNISON and GMB to reject the 2016/17 pay offer, the trade unions balloted their members on strike action with a vote in favour of industrial action. While the overall number of UNISON members who responded to the ballot was very low (38%), a majority of that low turnout voted to strike and did so on Tuesday 6 September 2016. GMB membership of workers in the college sector is very low and 69 GMB members have voted to strike across the sector, out of a support staff workforce of over 4,000. A joint strike by the two trade unions is now scheduled for **Tuesday 27 September 2016**; this will be UNISON's second strike this month.

Fairness of Pay Offer

The current pay offer is both fair and reasonable using the same two-year reference period applied to the lecturer's settlement. An employee earning £22,000 or less will be paid an additional £800 (equivalent to a pay rise of at least 3.6%, well ahead of both inflation and Public Sector Pay Policy). For employees in receipt of the Living Wage this offer represents an increase of over 5%. Additionally, in 2015 support staff were granted two additional days of leave and many saw a reduction in their working hours, with no loss of pay. The 2015/16 Pay Agreement provided a number of commitments that longer term will be an advantage to support staff.

The case for strike action is based on factually confused comparisons between the deal agreed with lecturers in March 2016 and the agreement that we reached with support staff in January 2016.

It is important to understand that the settlement for lecturers was a two-year deal (2015/16 and 2016/17) and represents an average 2.5% increase over two years, with the second year paid as an equivalent average flat cash conversion). However, the support staff settlement was only for 2015/16 and negotiations are ongoing for 2016/17.

UNISON and GMB trade unions claim that the flat cash settlement offered to support staff for 2016/17 amounts to £230 compared to a £450 flat cash pay uplift for lecturers; this is a misrepresentation of the facts. In simple terms, college support staff employees earning up to £22,000 per annum (approximately 50% of the workforce), the combination of last year's settlement with the current offer will equate to an increase of £800 for the two years.

Affordability

We do not believe that the trade unions' case for additional pay stands and while we are keen to engage with them, we believe that their demands are inflated and do not bear comparison with reality. These increases exceed Public Sector Pay Policy and we simply do not have the finances to continue to meet these ever-increasing demands by trade unions.

The recent Audit Scotland report noted the following:

*"Eight colleges are forecasting a deficit in 2015-16, and 11 in 2016-17". **

* Audit Scotland report – Scotland's colleges 2016, published August 2016.

What has been offered?

The flat cash pay uplift offered for 2016/17 uses the same principle and methodology that has been applied to lecturing staff, using a median salary.

In addition, a minimum total annual leave package of 36 days' pro rata inclusive of public fixed/closure days for all support staff has been offered.

The pay agreements reached and pay offer made, need to be considered in totality, not in isolation nor selective representation made.

How will students be affected by Industrial Action?

Affected colleges will seek to minimise impact on students. It is anticipated that all colleges will be open on Tuesday 27 September 2016. During the last strike action on Tuesday 6 September 2016 by UNISON only two colleges were closed, with only one third of UNISON members participating in the strike.

There can be little doubt however, that strike action will have a direct impact on students.

Next Steps

The Employers' Association will continue to work with all trade unions through the National Joint Negotiating Committee and remain open to dialogue. We believe that the strike is both unnecessary and damaging to students.

Colleges Scotland Employers' Association
26th September 2016