Dear Lecturers,

I am writing to you directly to convey our views on the pay dispute with the EIS-FELA so you can read, unfiltered, what the facts are regarding the strike action and why we believe it is in the best interests of everyone in the college sector that a resolution to the impasse is found.

Colleges Scotland Employers' Association has formally met the EIS-FELA on 14 separate occasions to try and end this 2017-20 pay dispute and has tabled eight offers trying to reach an agreement.

We are disappointed that the EIS-FELA has taken its members out on strike action without ever formally putting any of our offers to its members to consider, and we know through their communications that the EIS-FELA has claimed our seventh offer is only 2% over three years, when the actual offer is a flat cash settlement of £625 to all lecturers for years 1 and 2 with public sector pay policy in year 3 – which is 3% if you earn less than £36,500 or 2% if you earn over £36,500. In this offer, we have also extended public sector pay policy as 5/12ths of public sector pay policy to run until 31 August 2020, in line with the support staff agreement.

There is currently also an additional offer on the table – our eighth – which is on condition of concessions being made by the EIS-FELA. The detail of the conditional, eighth offer is as follows:

Year 1 and 2 – 1st April 2017 – 31st March 2019
All lecturing staff receive a £800 unconsolidated payment.

Year 3 – 1st April 2019 – 31st March 2020
Immediately following the final harmonisation payment in April 2019, a consolidated award of Public Sector Pay Policy for all unpromoted and promoted lecturer scale points. This will be applied as 3% for salary points up to £36,500 and 2% for salary points above £36,500. This provides parity with support staff within the relevant pay period.

Year 4 (five-month period) – 1st April 2020 – 31st August 2020
A consolidated award of public sector pay policy as defined for 2019/20 for all unpromoted and promoted lecturer scale points. This will be applied as 5/12ths of 3% for salary points up to £36,500 and 5/12ths of 2% for salary points above £36,500. This provides parity with support staff within the relevant pay period.

Colleges remain fully committed to implementing the terms and conditions agreed in the harmonisation deals in May and November 2017 and we seek additional conditions on five areas in return for increased pay as part of an agreement; these would simply apply what has been agreed with support staff and reflects further support to teaching and learning points, and these are points on which the EIS-FELA has agreed.

The five areas are to sign up to job evaluation; classroom observation and reflective practice; have future cost-of-living pay discussions along with support staff trade unions in line with the National Recognition and Procedures Agreement; agree that for some time-limited posts, the transfer to permanency arrangement will not be applied, again, providing parity with support staff, as requested by the EIS-FELA; and agree that V3 of the National Working Practices Agreement is the basis for future work on terms and conditions.

These current pay offers are in addition to the substantial nationwide pay increases for lecturers from harmonisation over the same three-year period, 2017-20. To put into a Scotland-wide context, £55.7 million is being spent on lecturers pay, terms and conditions, even before the cost of this pay dispute is resolved which will add more than £10 million.

This combined figure of at least £65.8 million across the sector compares with £37.1 million for your support staff colleagues over the same period, and these figures have been independently verified by the Scottish Funding Council. The combined national average pay rises for lecturers over three years from harmonisation and the current pay offer is more than £5,000.

All lecturers across Scotland are also benefitting from reduced teaching commitments, increased holidays and colleges' commitment to fund TQFEs through existing hours for teaching staff without formal qualifications. We are also extremely pleased that lecturers in Scotland are by far the best paid across the UK, on average almost £10,000 better off than lecturers in England.

It is deeply regrettable that your EIS-FELA representatives have continually indicated to us that they will not reflect on nor consider the wider implications of strike action and the swingeing cuts to services and jobs that would be required to fund an even bigger increase for lecturers pay than is currently on the table.

Any additional pay offer from colleges – what the EIS-FELA calls cost-of-living pay – is not coming from a funding allocation or budget, as you may have thought, but rather from cuts colleges must make. Our seventh offer already equates to cuts of £10.1 million, which a number of colleges have already informed us will be challenging for them and will lead to job losses and cuts to services. Colleges also have to find three per cent annual efficiency savings like other public bodies.

If agreement is reached on the additional, eighth offer, then deeper cuts will have to be applied. College finances and budgets are all publicly available for you to view. Short-term gains as the EIS-FELA desire will only lead to longer term sustainability consequences.

We are gravely concerned about the direction this industrial dispute is heading in. It is extremely disappointing that your representatives are committed to withholding assessment results from colleges if they receive a mandate from their members on action short of direct strike action.

Such a course of action would severely affect students in the sector, as without external verification by awarding bodies, they would be unable to achieve their qualifications, meaning they would be unable to move on to other courses at college or university, finalise their apprenticeships or move into jobs. This cannot be right, and we believe many lecturers will be aghast at this ploy, and, if so, we ask you to make it clear to your EIS-FELA branches you do not wish the students to be put at such a disadvantage.

Colleges reached a two-and-a-half-year deal in October 2018 with the three support staff trade unions (UNISON, Unite, and GMB) after compromises were made by both parties. The EIS recently reached agreement with COSLA and the Scottish Government after making concessions as part of the government's reform package on teacher empowerment and workload, and this is what happens in a normal negotiation process.

Unfortunately, your representatives at EIS-FELA even now refuse to make any concessions or compromises and demand a one-way process of colleges giving more to them. The EIS-FELA has taken lecturers out on strike for the third time in four years and the strike scheduled for Thursday 21 March 2019 would make it 11 days of strike action during that period. Strikes are costing you money, affecting your pensions and disrupting students' learning. They are in no-one's interests.

We were disheartened to note that when reacting to the recent teachers' agreement, the EIS-FELA President, posting on social media, proclaimed, "Moral of the story? Want a pay rise? Longer holidays? JOIN A UNION AND GO ON STRIKE."

Sadly, we recognise this inflexible approach as the sole tactic deployed by the EIS-FELA negotiating team is to refuse to engage in any meaningful, two-way process of negotiation and instead demand that the Scottish Government puts more increases into lecturers' pay. However, this isn't going to happen given the financial pressures the Holyrood administration are having to manage.

We will continue to engage with your EIS-FELA representatives, but we ask you to consider whether supporting this endless cycle of strikes is in your best interests, or the interests of students or the college sector, given all the benefits from harmonisation (including increases in pay and improved terms and conditions) and the current, pay offers on the table.

Yours faithfully,

Alex Linkston
Chair of the Employers' Association
Wednesday 20 March 2019