Joint Higher Education Unions' Claim 2026/27

Introduction

Staff working in higher education in the UK have faced several years of significant and successive real-terms pay cuts as pay awards have repeatedly failed to match inflation. This, coupled with a cost of living crisis, has resulted in worsening living standards for university staff. Last year, university staff received one of the worst pay awards given to workers in the UK, and far below those awarded to comparable professions. The 1.4% awarded to university staff stands in stark contrast to the 4% awarded to teachers, the 3.6% awarded to nurses and other healthcare staff in the NHS, with doctors receiving awards starting at a minimum of 4% and in many cases higher, and the 3.25% on average awarded to civil service staff. Pay awards for university staff are increasingly out of step with the rest of the UK workforce and do not come close to matching inflation.

We know that there is no trade-off between pay and jobs: on the contrary, below-inflation pay awards have been accompanied by mass job cuts, unsustainable workloads, lack of career progression, lack of job security and deteriorating employment conditions. These issues are all interconnected and reflective of a failed funding model that has wreaked havoc on a sector which contributes billions to the UK economy and which is essential to communities across the UK. Last year, universities announced 15,000 job cuts, and recent data shows a fall in academic staff employed at universities, marking a worrying trend.

Despite agreeing terms of reference to begin work on contract types, equality pay gaps, workload, and pay spine reform, university employers suspended this work and have failed to work together to progress it. In the meantime, each of these issues has become more pressing, and the continued failure to progress UK-wide action on these groups marks a lost opportunity to make universities more equitable places to work.

Policies emanating from government have often either failed to address the crisis facing higher education, or actively made it worse. The rise in tuition fees reflects tinkering around the edges of a funding model that doesn't work, where students face eye-watering loans that many will never pay off and staff face financial insecurity and repeated shocks. The restrictions on student visas and increasingly hardline right-wing

immigration policies risk the reputation and future of one of the few world-leading sectors in the UK, as does the failure to properly fund universities.

We expect UCEA to work together with us to tackle these issues in the upcoming negotiation meetings. Addressing the multiple crises facing higher education will require university employers to work with us for the benefit of the wider sector. We look forward to a positive response to our claim.

Joint Higher Education Unions Heads of Claim 2026/27

We are calling on UCEA for:

- An increase on all pay points of at least RPI + 3% or £3,000, whichever is the greater, to be paid in full in August 2026
- An increase to bring the minimum hourly rate of pay to £15/hour and for all HEIs to become Foundation Living Wage employers
- A review of the New JNCHES pay spine, in line with the already agreed Terms of Reference for the working group, and for this review to proceed irrespective of progress on the 2026/27 pay negotiations
- UCEA to work with the unions to develop meaningful and inclusive career pathways for professional services staff. These discussions would include career progression, career pathways, and grade drifts for professional services staff.
- Proceed with joint working on the other three negotiating groups on Contract Types, Workload, and Equality pay gaps and other areas of agreed joint work, in order to agree principles that can be developed into enforceable national agreements within a clearly defined timescale. This work should proceed irrespective of any position taken by any of the New JNCHES trade unions on a pay offer made by UCEA.
- UCEA to work with the joint trade unions to lobby the UK government on Higher Education funding reform
- To convene meetings of the Scottish sub-committee of New JNCHES as set out under the New JNCHES agreement.
- UCEA to work with the joint trade unions to avoid redundancies through the following:
    - Ensuring that all UCEA members adopt and adhere to agreed redundancy avoidance policies, based on the Trade Union Side (New JNCHES) Draft 1.4 Redundancy Avoidance Agreement and Code of Practice
    - Agreeing joint work to implement policy on the non-renewal of fixed-term contracts and cuts experienced by hourly paid staff during redundancy situations, to address the "hidden redundancy" crisis impacting casualised staff

Pay

We demand:

- An increase on all pay points of at least RPI + 3% or £3,000, whichever is the greater, to be paid in full in August 2026
- An increase to bring the minimum hourly rate of pay to £15/hour and for all HEIs to become Foundation Living Wage employers

The Joint Trade Unions expect a pay offer to be made as early in the process as possible in the first negotiating meeting of the New JNCHES forum.

We also expect this offer to be paid in full in August 2026. University employers are increasingly failing to implement the pay award in full despite being signed up to New JNCHES, leaving some staff to face several months of delays in receiving their pay award and without this being backdated. We are clear that all university employers must pay the award in full in August.

Due to pay awards not keeping pace with RPI, staff on the lowest pay bands are now earning 19.5% less than they did in 2011/12 in real terms, and staff on higher pay bands are earning 30% less than they did in 2011/12. The below table illustrates the stark and cumulative nature of the pay erosion staff have faced, with pay awards repeatedly failing to keep up with inflation.

JNCHES Pay Award and Price Index Inflation Figures Since 2011				
Year	**JNCHES Pay Award**	**CPIH Index**	**CPI**	**RPI**
2011-12	£150	3.80%	4.50%	5%
2012-13	1%	2.60%	2.80%	3%
2013-14	1%	2.30%	2.60%	3%
2014-15	2%	1.50%	1.50%	3%
2015-16	1% - 2.65%	0.40%	0.00%	1%
2016-17	1.1% - 3.1%	1.00%	0.70%	2%
2017-18	1.7% - 2.4%	2.60%	2.70%	4%
2018-19	2% or £425	2.30%	2.50%	4%
2019-20	1.8% - 3.65%	1.70%	1.80%	3%
2020-21	0%	1.00%	0.90%	2%
2021-22	1.5% - 3.6%	2.50%	2.60%	5%
2022-23	3% - 9%	7.90%	9.10%	12%
2023-24	5% - 8%	6.8%	7.3%	9.1%

2024-25	2.5% - 5.7%	3.3%	2.5%	3.7%
2025-26	1.4%	3.9%	3.4%	4.1%

Last year, the support staff unions were particularly disappointed that UCEA failed to address the impact felt by the lowest paid staff that have been most affected by inflationary increases in essential commodities such as food, fuel and housing. Even after the deletion of points 5 and 6 from the New JNCHES pay spine from July 2026, the minimum rate in higher education will be £22,566. This is around £2,000 per year less than the equivalent minimum rates in local government and the NHS. The HE employers committed to removing this gap and introducing equivalent minimum rates in last year's negotiations, but failed to include this in the final offer to unions.

We now have a ludicrous situation where the so called, 'annotation' to comply with the statutory National Minimum wage can constitute over 10% of someone's annual pay. The joint unions fully expect, as part of this year's pay offer, that employers begin to address the low pay issue in higher education by awarding staff an uplift of at least RPI + £3,000 or RPI + 3%, whichever is higher. Given current geopolitical events, our members are facing significant increases in fuel, housing, and food, and we expect the offer from university employers to reflect these pressures and the successive years of real-terms pay cuts that our members have faced.

Living Wage

The Living Wage has become a standard benchmark for the minimum needed for low-paid staff to have a "basic but acceptable" standard of living.

Higher education institutions are now competing in a labour market where the Living Wage of £13.45 an hour outside London and £14.80 an hour in London has become an increasingly common minimum point in the pay scale.

Studies supported by Barclays Bank have shown that Living Wage employers report an increase in productivity, a reduction in staff turnover / absenteeism rates and improvements in their public reputation.

Consequently, there are now over 16,000 employers accredited as Living Wage employers by the Living Wage Foundation, including almost half of the largest companies listed on the UK Stock Exchange and household names such as Aviva, Barclays, HSBC, Nationwide, Google and IKEA are among them.

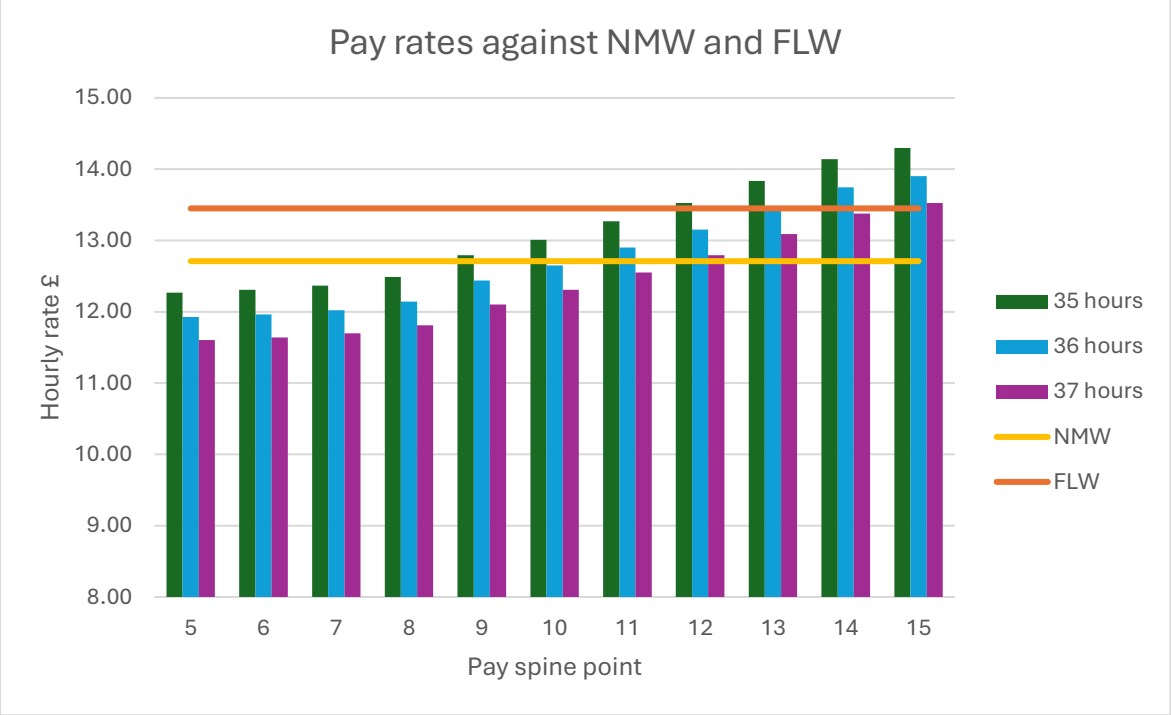
The precedent of the Living Wage, in tandem with recruitment and retention pressures, has also pushed major employers of low-paid staff in the retail sector to increase pay. Aldi are pushing rates for store assistants to up to £14.71 an hour in London and £13.35 an hour outside London from March 2026. Similarly, Marks & Spencer have announced

14.74 in London and £13.41 outside London from April, while Amazon raised its rate for frontline operations staff to between £14.30 and £15.30 per hour from September 2025.

Within the public sector, the Living Wage has now long been set as the minimum pay rate across all Scotland's public sector organisations and this was extended to social care workers in Scotland's private and voluntary sector from October 2016. The Welsh Government committed to achieving the same goal in social care from 2022.

Since 2011, almost half of all British universities have been accredited by the Living Wage Foundation as Living Wage Employers. And under Scotland's Fair Work Practices, all universities in receipt of grants received from the Scottish Funding Council are required to meet the Fair Work First criteria for payment of the real Living Wage.

The graph below shows how the bottom pay spine rates among higher education institutions compare against the £12.71 an hour National Minimum Wage set to come into force from April and the £13.45 an hour Living Wage applicable outside London from May.



On a 37-hour week, all points up to pay point 11 fall below the 2026 National Minimum Wage and it's necessary to go up to pay point 15 for the first to reach the Foundation Living Wage rate.

£15 per hour minimum wage

The joint unions believe that £15.00 per hour should be the minimum pay rate for all staff employed by universities. Multiple studies have shown that this increase would go some way to address the real-terms pay cuts that low-paid staff have experienced over the last decade and help alleviate the impact of the cost of living crisis on the lowest paid. It is shameful that university pay has not only failed to keep up with inflation, but that staff at the lowest end of the pay spine have had to rely on increases in the statutory minimum wage in order to see their rate per hour increase.

The unions believe that a £15.00 per hour minimum wage is reasonable and represents the minimum that higher education employers should do to address poverty pay in the sector. We call on all university employers to adopt this as their minimum hourly rate of pay.

Pay spine

We call on UCEA to work with the joint unions to undertake a review of the New JNCHES pay spine, in line with the already agreed Terms of Reference for the working group, and for this review to proceed irrespective of progress on the 2026/27 pay negotiations.

Pay increases have failed to keep up with the rising cost of living, directly impacting the sustainability of the pay spine. The lowest pay points have had to be raised or eliminated in order to comply with the statutory minimum wage.

The joint unions believe that there should be steps taken to urgently address the bottom end of the pay spine. This should ensure that HE employers are, at the very minimum, keeping up with the Living Wage Foundation rates irrespective of standard working hours contracts. We also believe that there should be joint work undertaken to ensure that the national pay spine provides universities and their staff with a suitable and sustainable national pay spine for the coming decades. With the reduction in pay points at the lower end, the reduction in differentials between SCPs, the removal of some increments from grades by HEIs, the time has come to review the national pay spine.

We believe that this review should work within the principle established by all partners in the National Framework Agreement.

The rationale for differentials in the pay structures is important, particularly at a time when our members are taking on more duties as HEIs restructure and make cuts in staffing. In recent years the outcomes of New JNCHES have resulted in the pay spine differentials not being consistent throughout the spine, which impacts on equality, fairness, and consistency grounds. The unions are calling for a restructure of the pay spine to restore the even incremental gaps throughout the pay spine and address the issues of pay compression that exist. Given the high levels of uncertainty affecting the sector, differentials need to be predictable over time rather than being eroded.

The principle of ensuring that all staff were employed on grades with incremental progression was an important element of the National Framework Agreement and one which the unions believe needs to be carried forward. With universities needing to take action to address poverty pay, there are an increasing number of staff who are not employed on incremental grades and the majority of staff have reached the top of their pay grade. The unions note that incremental pay increases are contractual, and that national pay bargaining relates to achieving increases in the pay award for all employees at the full rate for the job.

In addition to these concerns, there are significant issues relating to progression at the upper end of grades, particularly in respect of discretionary spinal column points. While

a number of institutions across the sector have moved away from discretionary points, in other institutions they remain in place but without transparent, consistently applied or time-bound progression mechanisms. As a result, many colleagues experience prolonged stagnation at the top of their grade.

For professional services staff in particular, once incremental progression has been exhausted there is frequently no meaningful route for further pay development other than promotion. Given the limited availability of promotional opportunities and the increasing restructuring of roles across the sector, this has left a substantial proportion of experienced staff effectively trapped at fixed pay points for extended periods. This stagnation compounds the impact of below-inflation settlements and contributes to the erosion of real-terms pay.

A comprehensive review of the national pay spine must therefore address progression beyond standard increments, including the future and function of discretionary points, the consistency of practice across institutions, and the restoration of predictable and transparent pay development. Without such reform, the principle of incremental progression established within the National Framework Agreement risks being undermined in practice.

Despite jointly agreeing to Terms of Reference around this working group, UCEA has repeatedly failed to make progress on this working group. We are calling on UCEA to work with us to urgently progress this work irrespective of progress on the 2026/27 pay negotiations.

Career pathways for professional services staff

UCEA to work with the unions to develop meaningful and inclusive career pathways for professional services staff. These discussions would include career progression, career pathways, and grade drifts for professional services staff.

University staff across the United Kingdom are being subjected to brutal attacks on their jobs, including through mass redundancies, rising casualisation, and pay erosion. In many higher education institutions, professional services staff have been the first to face cuts, the erosion of their working conditions and devaluation of their roles, and an increasing lack of professional development and career progression opportunities.

Professional services staff including academic-related, administrative, technical, and estates staff work across all parts of higher education institutions, collaborating with academics in developing and delivering research, teaching and learning. These staff hold expertise across a wide breadth of specialist roles including IT, libraries, archives, student recruitment, widening participation, mental health and counselling services, and human resources. Despite being central to the success of higher education institutions, the experience, knowledge, and professionalism of professional services staff are too often unrecognised and undervalued by employers in higher education institutions. The marketisation of higher education has systematically undermined quality, degraded professional expertise, and pushed institutions into harmful cost-cutting spirals. Departments are being shut down, professional services dismantled, and mass redundancies imposed on staff across the sector at an unprecedented scale. Career pathways within professional services have been eroded and are virtually non-existent in many institutions, with staff facing a lack of progression opportunities within professional services.

Unite undertook a national survey of Higher Education technicians in the autumn of 2025 on the issue of technician career progression and the implementation of the Technician Commitment initiative. In terms of workplace priorities, pay was the respondents' highest priority with workload and career development as the next highest identifiable priorities. Almost half (49%) of respondents said that they had not been offered any specialist technical training in the last two years. 47% of those responding said that the contributions of technical staff are not visible and recognised at their institution and 62% percent responded that that the local implementation of the Technician Commitment was more of a tick box exercise with no meaningful benefits in practice. The compression of the National Pay Spine in Grades 5 and 6 over many years is acting as a disincentive for staff in those areas to progress their careers even if those opportunities were available.

The joint trade unions are asking that UCEA work together to develop meaningful and inclusive career pathways for professional services staff. Employers should acknowledge the contribution to higher education institutions by these staff and provide them with genuine opportunities for career progression. This work would include action

on career progression, career pathways, and grade drifts for professional services staff. Our expectation is also that this work will apply to all professional services staff, whether they are employed directly by universities or indirectly via subsidiary companies as is increasingly the case in some institutions.

Pay related elements

We call on UCEA to proceed with joint working on the other three negotiating groups on Contract Types, Workload, and Equality pay gaps and other areas of agreed joint work, in order to agree principles that can be developed into enforceable national agreements within a clearly defined timescale. This work should proceed irrespective of any position taken by any of the New JNCHES trade unions on a pay offer made by UCEA.

Contract Types/Casualisation

In 2023, 29% of academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts. Casualisation remains a persistent issue plaguing the sector, and exacerbates inequalities amongst staff. Statistics show that staff from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to have permanent contracts, as are staff aged 40 and under.

In 2023/24 81% of white staff in HE were on a permanent contract (excluding atypical staff) compared with only 66 percent of Asian staff, 72 percent of Mixed-Race staff and 73 percent of Black staff. We have repeatedly called on university employers to show their commitment to addressing casualisation and we expect UCEA to work with the trade unions to progress the previously agreed terms of reference on contract types..

We expect the JNCHES working group looking at contract types to:

- Identify ways in which the sector can reduce its use of casualised contracts.
- Make a recommendation to act on zero hours contracts such that all staff having at least minimum guaranteed hours that reflect their working pattern on an employee contract.
- Develop, agree, and promote principles at a UK- level which employers are able to apply through the appropriate local consultation and/or negotiating machinery on the following contract types:
    - Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs): to include an appropriate workload allocation mechanism, guarantee that all GTAs are paid at the appropriate grade for the work they are conducting; receive paid training, and have access to the same rights and entitlements as all permanent members of staff.
    - Fixed-term contracts (including open ended contracts with an 'at risk' date): to include agreed limitations on their use, a minimum contract length of 24 months (other than in genuine cases of cover), a process to move all staff who have more than one contract extension or with no more than 4 years' service to genuine open ended contracts with a focus on better management

of redeployment, the provision of bridging funds (for example for use between research grants for both research and support staff working on externally funded research projects) and a move to research 'hubs' or pooled resourcing models in line with the Research staff manifesto.

- Post Graduate Researchers (PGRs): to include an agreement to the principles in the UCU PGR manifesto as the basis for local negotiations aimed at creating greater alignment between the terms and conditions for postgraduate researchers, in their capacity as doctoral researchers, and employees.
- Hourly-paid contracts: to include agreement on a process to move staff on hourly paid contracts to fractional contracts.

- Review progress on reducing casualisation for different contract types on an annual basis.
- Recommend to UCEA's members to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment when undertaking work relating to contract types so that mitigating action can be taken with regard to any adverse impact/s identified. Employers should already be undertaking these in any case and should be reminded of this.

Equality pay gaps

We expect UCEA to progress work with us on the equality pay gaps negotiating group as per the previously agreed terms of reference, in order to:

- Consider the relevant data available and, where possible, collect data that is unavailable through HESA;
- Examine the relevant data through an intersectional lens for gender, ethnicity, and disability pay gaps, where available;
- Present an analysis of the data and the issues to be addressed at a UK-wide level, broken down for academic and professional services and clinical academic staff, and by contract type where possible (including outsourced/indirectly employed staff), to New JNCHES and to HEIs, and relevant sector-level benchmarks to allow meaningful local action plans. UCEA will also recommend to its members to benchmark their results using the UCEA pay gaps dashboard;
- Explore the impact on pay gaps of direct and indirect employment strategies;
- Develop and agree principles and minimum standards which employers are able to apply in action plans to address pay gaps based upon good practice, from

within and outside of the sector, timescales, and the role of trade unions in action planning. These action plans will be developed and implemented locally;

- Develop and agree guidance on positive action initiatives to address equality pay gaps within the university workforce which remove well-evidenced barriers and systemic bias;
- Develop and agree guidance on the creation of safe environments and mechanisms through which union members/employees feel comfortable declaring protected characteristics;
- Encourage union members/employees to share protected characteristics data with their employers, highlighting the value of such information and its importance for future analysis of gender, ethnicity, disability, and other equality pay gaps and helping to address discrimination;
- Ensure that UCEA members undertake timetabled Equal Pay Audits and then share all audit data with their recognised trade unions;
- Review progress on all pay gaps at a UK level, including the proportion of HEIs making progress towards sector benchmarks, on an annual basis and report updated figures to the trade unions and UCEA members with further guidance and examples of success, prior to the annual pay negotiating round.

Workload

The joint trade unions are clear that actions need to be taken by employers to reduce unsafe and excessive workloads, and that such excessive workloads mean, in effect, that staff are doing more work for less pay. We expect the negotiating group on workload to look at the following:

- Provide guidance and good practice examples in relation to workload management and reduction of work-related stress for all groups of staff, to enable HEIs to develop local action plans, in consultation and/or negotiation with recognised local trade union representatives, whichever is appropriate, to reduce the incidence of work-related stress/ill-health;
- Promote the HSE's Management Standards as a sector wide minimum;
- Develop and promote good practice which employers are able to adopt using the appropriate local consultation and/or negotiating machinery on workload management;

- Include consideration of the workload consequences of organisational change and vacancy management policies in workload management principles, taking into account post-pandemic changes to patterns of work;
- Recommend to UCEA's members to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment when undertaking workload management so that mitigating action can be taken with regard to any adverse impact/s identified.
- Promote any sector guidance for institutional organisational risk assessments, developed by USHA in consultation with the trade unions through the HESH forum, that will support the implementation of organisation level stress risk assessments to prevent and reduce known and foreseeable workload stressors.

To establish the Scottish sub-committee of New JNCHES as set out under the New JNCHES agreement

The New JNCHES Agreement expressly acknowledges the reality of the establishment of devolved HE sectors for the devolved administrations within the UK, and that a subcommittee of the NEW JNCHES Committee may be formed to look at HE issues for any of the devolved administrations. There is clear evidence that there are some diverging trends and structures emerging in Scotland relative to the rest of the UK. The Fair Work Convention is Scotland specific and compliance with this is a condition of government funding. Currently, universities are required to comply with two of the seven fair work first criteria for funding but as of April 2027, they will be required to comply with all seven, a substantial change for employers.

A steering group has also been established by the Scottish Government and Universities Scotland, which will review the sustainability of the HE sector in Scotland, including funding. There have been clearly established red lines set out in the terms of reference of the group, where policies that do not align with Scottish Minister's ongoing commitment to free tuition will not be considered. Trade unions have been invited to participate in this group, and the parallel reference group for greater trade union input.

Both of these devolved matters and work streams, along with any other future Scottish-specific items influencing funding, are beyond the scope of the full JNCHES. To ensure adherence to and embedding of funding requirements within Scottish HEI's and how these may impact on staff pay, it is our belief that a Scottish JNCHES subcommittee would provide the appropriate forum for legitimate discussion and engagement on this.

For this reason, the trade unions seek the activation of the Scottish New JNCHES Sub-committee to look at Scottish issues. Continued failure to implement this part of the New JNCHES agreement in blocking the formation of the Scottish New JNCHES Sub-Committee is a clear indication of bad faith by the employer's side.

Over recent years, the importance of having a Scottish sub-committee has become more pronounced. The ways in which Brexit has affected Scottish universities is different from HEIs in England given the different funding and tuition fee regimes. The Higher Education Governance (Sc) Act 2016 has been implemented, with dialogue taking place on this, and other key sectoral employment issues, in Scotland out-with New JNCHES. The Covid 19 pandemic also demonstrated the need for an effective bargaining body in Scotland to discuss issues specific to the sector in Scotland that affect the workforce.

The trade union claim is to establish the Scottish Sub-Committee of New JNCHES as set out under the New JNCHES Agreement. The main purpose of the sub-committee

would be to deal with matters not currently being dealt with at the New JNCHES Committee and to inform NEW JNCHES where best practice is being established in Scotland so it can be considered at the UK level.

UCEA to work with the joint trade unions to lobby the UK government on Higher Education funding reform

The joint unions recognise that the current marketized funding system has wreaked havoc on higher education and resulted in widespread job losses, cuts to course, and departmental closures. We are of the view that urgent action needs to be taken to address the systemic issues within the sector, which are directly linked to the funding system. These structural issues have been exacerbated by recent government policies which have had a detrimental impact on the university sector, including restrictions on student visas, the proposed international student levy, and now the proposal of an unacceptable 'emergency brake' on student visa applications from Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Cameroon. All of these proposals harm a sector that contributes billions to the UK economy and are against the interests of students, staff, and the wider sector.

The JNCHES unions welcomed the opportunity to discuss Higher Education funding with UCEA and other employer bodies and the parties agreeing to continue these discussions with a view to undertaking joint lobbying on this issue with the UK and devolved governments. We are therefore calling on UCEA to progress this work to jointly lobby the UK government on higher education reform for the sake of the sector as a whole.

Redundancies

Last year, universities announced over 15,000 job cuts. In the last three years, 30,000 jobs have been lost, with universities spending hundreds of millions on severance pay. These figures do not include those 'hidden' redundancies in the form of the non-renewal of fixed term contracts as part of the wider job losses facing the sector, which would make the numbers much higher. These attacks on jobs show no signs of abating this year, and institutions across the UK are facing disputes over compulsory redundancies.

The joint unions are asking UCEA to work with us to take urgent action to address this crisis. As well as working with us to jointly lobby government, we are asking for urgent action to avoid redundancies across the UK. This would include:

- Ensuring that all UCEA members adopt and adhere to agreed redundancy avoidance policies, based on the Trade Union Side (New JNCHES) Draft 1.4 Redundancy Avoidance Agreement and Code of Practice
- Agreeing joint work to implement policy on the non-renewal of fixed-term contracts and cuts experienced by hourly paid staff during redundancy situations, to address the "hidden redundancy" crisis impacting casualised staff