Ben Thomas and Shahenda Suliman
Joint Union Side Secretaries
Joint Higher Education Sector Trade Unions

By email

22 June 2026

Dear Ben and Shahenda,

Pay spine review

I am writing further to my letter of 15 May 2026, which set out UCEA's full and final offer. Included in our offer was a proposal for time-limited negotiations to seek agreement on a new pay spine which is properly costed and affordable. During the 2026-27 New JNCHES pay round, UCEA and the Joint HE Trade Unions agreed a set of principles which would form the basis for negotiation of the pay spine, and UCEA undertook to consult participating employers on those principles.

UCEA has now completed its consultation with employers. On this specific element of our full and final offer, UCEA is willing to begin negotiations on the pay spine on the basis of the agreed principles, as set out in Annex B of our offer letter.

On the assumption that this is agreeable to the Joint Trade Unions, we are looking forward to starting this work with the trade unions and UCEA will identify dates to convene the Joint Working Group based on the initial Terms of Reference for the pay spine review, contained in Annex A of our offer letter.

Annexes A and B are attached to this letter for ease of reference.

Yours sincerely,

Raj Jethwa

Raj Jethwa
Chief Executive

cc Greg Barnett, UCU

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Annex A – New JNCHES Pay Spine review: Terms of reference

Background and purpose

The New JNCHES 2023-24 negotiating round included a commitment to a joint review of the UK HE pay spine, with time limited negotiations to seek agreement of a new pay spine and principles for its implementation, paying particular attention to compression within the pay spine. Although the terms of reference for work on the review of the pay spine were developed in the New JNCHES 2023-24 round, and subsequently in the 2024-25 round, any agreed joint work to review the pay spine will be taken forward as an outcome of the 2025-26 negotiating round.

The negotiations will seek agreement on a no detriment basis* and ensure that the proposal is properly costed and affordable**. The review will take into account the impact of increases in the National Living Wage, which has resulted in the deletion of points at the bottom of the pay spine and the impact that this has had on subsequent pay points. The aim of the review will be to reach a joint position for a nationally agreed pay spine which both UCEA and the trade unions are able to recommend to their respective memberships. The review will recommend a process of implementation, for local discussion and agreement, and the timeframe for such implementation from the beginning of the 2026-27 pay year. This will include taking necessary action after carrying out an Equalities Impact Assessment to rectify any potential discrimination identified by that.

** the detail to be discussed in the working group*

*** including reference to any findings of the joint agreed review of sector finances*

Remit of negotiations

The outcome of the negotiations will be an agreed, jointly costed proposal for the reform of the pay spine which will strive to standardise the differentials between pay points and be accompanied by a revised Appendix A to the New JNCHES Framework Agreement laying out the principles to be applied by HEIs during implementation and a revised Appendix B listing the new annual salary pay points. To achieve this, the following will be included:

- consideration of data relating to the use of the pay spine in the sector including, but not limited to:
    - qualitative research relating to the challenges and limitations of the current spine from employers and trade unions.
    - quantitative data on grading structures and number of staff on each pay point, including equality data.
    - secondary research on approaches taken to address similar pay and grading developments in other sectors (including, for example, potential benchmarking against external comparators etc).
- consider current and future developments through the pay spine, identify and seek to address/remove drivers of pay spine compression, including a potential mechanism to avoid future compression of the pay spine.
- model potential changes to the pay spine and examine the associated costs.
- agree a proposed new pay spine.

The remit of the negotiations will be to agree proposals for a new UK pay spine. It is recognised that the constituent members of New JNCHES will need to consult their members on such proposals; the intention of these negotiations will be to agree proposals that can be recommended for acceptance.

Both parties understand the importance of, and sign-up to the principle of, reaching agreement on a new UK pay spine. If agreement is reached, both parties agree that the new spine will be recommended for implementation. In the unlikely event that no agreement is reached the existing position regarding the pay spine will remain as per the New JNCHES agreement.

Negotiating group membership

- up to 13 representatives, including at least one full-time official and one lay representative from each union, to be determined by the Joint Trade Unions.

  It is agreed that a minimum representation of one representative from each union will be sufficient quorum to convene a meeting.

- up to 10 Employer representatives (including UCEA officers and representatives from HEIs)

  Additional specialists may be invited with the agreement of both sides to provide input and research findings where relevant.

Pay spine review negotiations: Chair and secretariat

The negotiations will be chaired on an alternating basis.

The joint secretaries will act as co-ordinator between meetings.

UCEA will provide secretariat support to the negotiations.

Meetings

Will be held regularly and as required to progress work effectively within the agreed timescale.

The meetings can take place in person or virtually, so that the joint work can be completed within the agreed timescales and provide reasonable opportunity for both sides to participate.

Responsibility for hosting meetings will be shared between the employers and the trade unions as appropriate.

Timescales

The first negotiating meeting will be held as soon as possible in accordance with the schedule of work provided as part of the Employers offer for the 2025-26 pay round with the aim to complete negotiations as soon as possible.

Annex B – Proposals for a review of the pay spine

Building on jointly agreed Terms of Reference from previous New JNCHES pay rounds, UCEA's Full and Final offer for 2025-26 included a commitment to a joint review of the New JNCHES pay spine, with time limited negotiations to seek agreement of a new pay spine which is properly costed and affordable. Although this review was not progressed in 2025-26, UCEA is willing to revisit this commitment as part of the 2026-27 New JNCHES pay round.

As a basis for subsequent detailed discussions on the review of a new pay spine, UCEA proposes that it would be useful for New JNCHES to reach an initial agreement on the guiding principles which should underpin attempts to negotiate a new pay spine.

The negotiations will seek agreement on a no detriment basis* and will take into account the impact of increases in the National Living Wage on both the bottom of the pay spine and subsequent points.

**Detail to be discussed in the working group.*

UCEA notes the desire expressed in the Joint HE Trade Unions' Full Claim that a review of the pay spine should seek to:

- Achieve consistent and even differentials throughout the pay spine
- Address pay-spine compression
- Review the use of discretionary pay points
- Ensure the durability of the pay spine
- Be recommended by UCEA and the Joint Trade Unions to all institutions with an agreed timeline for implementation.

UCEA would also want the review to:

- Explore the basis for pay progression between spine points
- Take into account local approaches adopted by HEIs to address pay spine challenges.
- Ensure that any new proposals can be applicable across HEIs, regardless of their size, focus or geographical location

If a set of guiding principles can be agreed between UCEA and the Joint HE Trade Unions by the end of the 2026-27 New JNCHES pay round, UCEA will consult participating employers on these principles and assume that Trade Unions would wish to consult their representative structures.

If these principles are endorsed by all parties as the basis for the pay spine review, a Joint Working Group will be established to carry out detailed negotiation on proposals for pay spine reform with the aim of concluding negotiations by 31 December 2026.

The joint working group will also consider the timescale for any transitional arrangements for implementation by HEIs.

If agreement can be reached, the outcome of these negotiations, together with indicative timescales and guidance for implementation and assimilation, will be subject to further consultation with their respective memberships/decision-making structures of UCEA and the Joint Trade Unions. This consultation will be conducted on the basis that any new pay spine will be implemented by an HEI on or after 1 August 2027.