 

Dear Damian,

May we begin by stating how welcome it is to hear statements from both yourself and the Skills Minister on the importance of technical and vocational education. The UK faces many challenges in the coming years as we seek to boost productivity, narrow the skills gap and ensure that our changing economy does not result in any communities being ‘left behind’. Further education colleges can and should be a fundamental part of the solution to all of these issues.

What is increasingly clear, though, is that the current level of funding for our colleges does not match the government’s ambition for technical education and skills. While the government has pledged some welcome additional funding for T-Levels and apprenticeships, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies recently highlighted, cuts in other parts of the college budgets have all but cancelled out this investment.

The current funding situation is taking a heavy toll on the dedicated staff who sit at the heart of our further education system. They have seen their pay packets shrink by more than 25% in real terms over the last decade. On 5 December 2018, the joint unions were dismayed to receive yet another below-inflation pay recommendation from the employer body, the Association of Colleges - just 1%, or a minimum of £250, with the acknowledgement that there will be many colleges who will not even be able to afford this.

Staff who have not received a cost of living award for over 5 years tell us of how low pay affects their mental health and morale. Many staff working in colleges today speak about how they have resorted to using food banks, have been unable to heat their homes adequately and have fallen in debt in order to pay for basic household necessities. These are shocking realities in a sector which is being hailed by government as the key to the UK’s future economic success.

The best way to ensure that vocational pathways gain more value and currency amongst students, their parents and their future employers is to ensure that they are well resourced and delivered by highly-skilled professionals. But two-thirds of colleges currently cite low pay as a key reason for difficulties in recruiting and retaining the staff they need.

The simple truth is that parity of esteem will not be achieved without parity of funding. The full range of learning offered by colleges – supporting people of all ages and backgrounds to improve their skills, employability and wellbeing – must be properly supported in order to ensure everyone can fulfil their potential.

We are therefore writing to urge you to swiftly address the current issues of funding and pay in colleges. Staff across the further education sector are committed to working for students, but they feel desperately undervalued and are severely underpaid. We urgently need an injection of funding, ring-fenced for pay, to show our members the recognition they deserve for the great work they do every day.

Yours sincerely,

 

**Dave Prentis Matt Waddup**

**UNISON University and College Union**