

Solidarity to all branches that took strike action this year, and to those still in dispute. For some members this was their first time striking; for others, it was the first time in many years. This shows there is a growing mood amongst members to fight back.

FE in England remains the only part of UK education without national binding bargaining. The result is a fragmented and unequal system where staff doing the same job can be paid significantly different rates, and have larger workloads depending on their employer and local finances.

FE, and particularly Adult Education, remains at the sharp end of a long-term funding crisis. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that although recent increases in 16 - 19 funding have partially reversed earlier cuts, FE funding per student has still not recovered from over a decade of real-terms cuts. FE remains structurally underfunded relative to need and demand.

The consequences of this are clear. DfE-linked data released last month, shows around **15% of FE teachers leave the sector each year** – and it has been this high for over 15 years! And staff under 29 are leaving in even greater numbers. The research shows that “pay, workload and a lack of progression are key factors in FE teacher exits and highlights the growing pay gap between teachers in FE and secondary schools”.

This will probably not surprise any FE delegate reading this, we see these problems day in day out with high turnover of staff, colleagues that are not replaced and the number of students ever increasing.

Votes at FESC 2025

It is worth recalling that at last year’s FESC, delegates voted by 2:1 for escalating the New Deal for FE. FESC overwhelmingly voted to begin an England-wide nationally coordinated ballot in September. This lay the basis for a strong challenge to employers and government. It also showed that delegates recognised that national bargaining, pay and workload cannot be won branch by branch.

Yet despite those decisions, action this year remained uneven. Delays in the ballot, then gaps between the ballot and strike action, weakened momentum and left branches vulnerable to pressure from management to accept deals. That’s why this year’s conference matters so much.

A key motion passed last year, reaffirmed that FESC is the sovereign decision-making body for FE policy in UCU and that “once decisions are reached, we must act in unity”. That principle matters now more than ever, because the question facing delegates this year is clear – do we escalate and tackle this crisis or drift and fragment further?

No more delays, we need nationally coordinated action

FE2 provides useful suggestions around further research and more branch briefings. However, resolves 3 delays any decision-making till “early 2027”. This creates two serious problems.

First, delegates are being asked to postpone making key decisions for another 8–11 months, despite being gathered here *precisely* to determine the next steps (and after giving up their half-term holidays!)

Second, it risks effectively abandoning UCU’s national claim for 2026/27 which has already been submitted to employers. This would be an absolute gift to the employers, and UCU National Negotiators would be attending the national negotiations in June with no leverage whatsoever.

Timing is always a key issue. Delegates warned last year that delays could push action into January, concerned that long gaps between decisions and actions would dissipate momentum and branches would be pressured into deals. Moreover, January strikes do not provide as such strong leverage as action before the October census. Therefore, decisions must be taken with a timetable factored in.

We cannot build a serious national campaign on a timetable that postpones decisions beyond the bargaining cycle we are already in. An amendment to resolve this problem, was unfortunately ruled out of order by CBC. *Therefore, if motion FE2 is not amended – oppose FE2.*

Some within the union are attempting to counterpose workload to pay, arguing that workload – not pay - is the real issue facing members. But this is a false choice as the recruitment and retention crisis in FE are driven by both. Staff are leaving the sector in their droves because they cannot afford to live on FE salaries and are burnt out by workloads. And the workloads remain so high, because FE colleges struggle to retain staff – **oppose FE3.**

A more effective strategy is laid out in **motions FE4 to FE8 and their associated amendments.** These

motions recognise that winning on pay, workload and national bargaining requires a genuinely national campaign. One, because members and branches feel stronger and more confident when they act together. Second, because we cannot win our demands fighting branch-by-branch.

To win our national demands, we need the employers to feel pressure nationally. As a union we are stronger when every branch takes action, whether that is through nationally coordinated or by aggregated ballots. We would prefer aggregated, but the key question is ensuring we act collectively. In UCU FE, we do have the capacity to apply pressure on both the employers and government, but the union needs to show it has the will to do this. However, when branches opt out of that agreed national strategy it leaves those left in feeling isolated. We cannot lose sight of our main demands - we need to use national industrial pressure to deal with the national crisis facing us.

We also need a political campaign to increase pressure on our government. Labour are currently in turmoil, with a growing layer arguing for policies that support workers. In this context, a Labour government under pressure from FE staff in the Autumn term (which is also when the NEU are balloting) – could be a powerful, persuasive force. But this is only possible if UCU builds a big, visible national campaign with briefings and lobbies.

Finally, delegates must reject the argument that college deficit budgets prevent employers improving pay and workloads. Staff and student should not pay the price for years of government cuts or management failures. Members and reps must feel empowered to argue that colleges should go into the red as that would expose the true scale of underfunding. As long as institutions continue absorbing the crisis internally, governments can continue pretending the system is sustainable. **Support motions FE 4 to FE8 and all associated amendments.**

Winning manageable workloads is essential, but workload agreements can be difficult to pin down. Management tend to agree protocols or woolly policies, which need continuous monitoring and rely on staff feeling confident to say no. Therefore, workload protections need to be concrete and enforceable e.g. reductions in contact time, dedicated attendance staff and so on. **Support motion 9.**

A crisis in wellbeing

Staff wellbeing continues to be undermined by excessive workloads, relentless pressure and the damaging impact of Ofsted inspection. This is damaging to staff, to students learning and undermines the role and values of education more broadly. **Support FE12 and FE13.**

We are sadly all too familiar with the growing mental health crisis amongst our students, and not just our young people but also our adult students. Colleges urgently need to hire more specialist support staff and ensure the proper funding of wellbeing services. Student wellbeing cannot be treated as an afterthought, or an expendable cut by management. **Support FE14 and FE14a.1**

Defending adult ed from cuts & the far right

Once again, the government has imposed short-sighted and damaging cuts to Adult Skills funding. Funding for adult education is now around 30% lower than it was 20 years ago, with almost four million “lost learners” since 2010. Adult Education has always played a vital social role. It provides opportunities, develops skills, rebuilds confidence and strengthens communities. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and rising inequality, its importance has only grown. **Support FE16.**

Unemployment is already at just over 5%, and there are millions more classed by the government as “economically inactive” but want to work. For some this is due to barriers to work around caring roles and disabilities which must be challenged. For others, they lack access to training and support. Adult Education should be central to addressing this and there must be greater parity between providers. **Support FE17.**

At the same time, Reform UK poses a growing threat to ESOL provision. In Greater Lincolnshire, the Reform-controlled council has moved to cut ESOL courses from 2027 despite opposition in public consultation. These attacks have been justified using divisive and racist rhetoric claiming ESOL does not “benefit natives”.

UCU must stand firmly with ESOL staff and students against these attacks. Defending ESOL means defending the very core of education – education that enables social integration, learning and equality. We cannot allow migrants and multilingual learners to be scapegoated for a crisis caused by years of underfunding and political failure. **Support FE19, FE 20 and FE 21.**

- *Oppose FE2 (if it's not amended – support if it is).*
- *Oppose FE3.*
- *Support all other motions and amendments*

UCU Left is committed to building a democratic, accountable campaigning union that mobilises & involve members in defending & improving our pay & conditions and defending education.

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