

Report from Further Education Committee meeting, Friday 14th December 2007.

Howard Miles, 17th December 2007, North East regional rep.

The main items on the agenda of this meeting were FE funding and the pay campaign.

Pay

The national pay offer for further education staff is 2.55 percent for this year. As inflation is over 4 percent this amounts to a pay cut. Our campaign for decent pay is now well under way: materials (leaflets, posters, stickers) have been sent to all branch secretaries, and the General Secretary, Sally Hunt, has emailed members twice highlighting the campaign and urging us to sign an online Christmas card to the Association of Colleges, demanding better pay. This has already been signed by thousands of members. It can be accessed on www.ucu.org.uk/abetterdeal

Over 70% of branches nationally have now returned their membership figures. They have until the end of December to complete this. Some of those who have not completed are non-AoC branches, or have accepted an offer locally, or are poorly functioning branches currently. Only five in Yorkshire and Humberside have not done so and only one, I understand, in Northern Region. It would seem that in several of these branches there are currently no appropriate branch officers to complete the checks.

Very importantly, and for the first time ever, we are talking to the National Union of Teachers about co-ordinating our pay campaigns. We are hoping to ballot at the same time for strike action early next year. Joint regional pay campaign rallies with the NUT are being planned for the New Year. The UCU pay campaign is being developed around the slogan 'our college, our community, our union' as a platform for a better deal for FE staff and learners, and a suggested slogan for the joint campaign with NUT is 'our schools, our colleges, our communities'. This makes it clear that we see the fight over pay as necessarily involving the defence of our colleges' and schools' roles in the wider community, of quality provision, of educational principles, of lifelong learning and so on.

Conference on the effects of the market on post-16 education

UCU plans to hold a conference involving both further and higher education staff in March which will look at how the market agenda has hit post-16 education and how we can develop a collective strategy in response. This links to discussions going on in the union (deriving from motions adopted at Annual Congress in May) about how we can shift from a focus on servicing members to one which highlights the role of campaigning and collective resistance to the attacks we face.

FE funding

The FEC also had a long discussion about the current raft of government funding proposals for FE which all those present recognised as a threat to the cohesion of the Sector.

In a recent speech Gordon Brown alluded to two distinct arenas of further education delivery: the 14 – 19 agenda, and the rest. These would be bound to have major implications for the structure of colleges, on their role in our communities, and on the pay and conditions of lecturers.

Much of the 14 – 19 provision is likely to come under local authority control, though under what remit is not very clear. This perhaps could begin to address the democratic deficit FE has laboured under since Incorporation, but then again, it may not!

While the various documents (the LSC Remit Letter; another letter on per capita funding; two papers on the new Diplomas, central to the governments' 14 – 19 reforms; an AoC policy statement on 14 – 19; a paper on changes to the machinery of government – the split between the new departments for Children, Schools and Families on the one hand and Innovation, Universities and Skills on the other; an LSC Statement of Priorities; LSC train to Gain plans) are somewhat difficult to digest, it was pretty clear that per capita funding for FE students is very likely to remain something like 20% lower than for 14 – 19 year olds in schools.

It was also pretty clear that further real cuts in Adult Education funding are planned in the next few years, increasing the pressure towards full cost courses.

The proposed funding restrictions on Equivalent Learning Qualifications (a traditional avenue for those who might want to change career, for example) also seem to undermine the government's commitment to lifelong learning.

Lots of other things, according to UCU's officials, are floating around, but no-one is really sure exactly what.

While there were perhaps some positive glimmers (the end to the 16-hour Rule has been mooted for example, and, despite the continuing predominance of terms like 'skills', 'demand-led', the market, and so on, the term 'community' has made a tentative reappearance) the overall impression was a negative one in terms of how all this could affect our colleges and our pay and conditions.

Clearly this will be a central issue for us going into the new year. It was agreed that the FEC and UCU's FE officials need to develop an appropriate analysis and strategy to address the threats facing us, to be considered at an FEC meeting early in 2008.

Bullying and harassment

A recent survey of members identified bullying and harassment as the single issue of most current concern to UCU members (in both FE and HE). This was reflected in Congress motions in May.

Some work on this has already been done (see the UCU website) but more work needs to be carried out to examine how we develop appropriate collective responses

where we can, and better arm our branch officers and local reps to take on increasing instances of bullying in post 16 education. Often this is linked to workload, managerial style, lack of remission and facility time, and so on.

The FEC was asked to nominate four people who could, along with four from the HEC, work with the appropriate officials to address these issues. Since I wrote the motion on bullying which my branch at Bradford successfully moved at Congress to become UCU policy, I volunteered to be part of this ad hoc group. Therefore, if you have comments or particular points you would like to raise or have raised in this group, please let me know.

IfL Code of Professional Practice

FEC also received a draft copy of the IfL code of professional practice and an accompanying questionnaire.

Committee members expressed concerns at the overly disciplinary, rather than professionally supportive, ethos of this code. You can access the code and the questionnaire on the IfL website and members are encouraged to express any concerns we might have about this before it becomes set in stone. You only have until the end of December to do this, and the agreed code, including disciplinary processes, will become live from 1st April 2008 (we are expected to register by 31st March 2008).

Howard Miles, FEC

You can contact me on h.miles@bradfordcollege.ac.uk or lhm2913@talktalk.net or 01274 433126.