

Letter to Nadhim Zahawi

Secretary of State for Education

Dear Secretary of State

Thank you for your letter of 28 February in reply to my letter of 7 February. I mentioned in that letter the unprecedented recruitment and retention challenges facing colleges. So, I wanted to share with you our timely report on those challenges.

The report shows that colleges have over 6,000 vacancies, with many persisting for more than 3 months. The immediate result is that existing staff are overstretched with the risk that students are not experiencing the learning and support that they deserve. Just as worryingly, colleges are struggling to find the staff needed to teach on T Levels, STEM subjects and labour market priorities such as construction, engineering and health. Alongside the increasing challenges in recruiting student support and wider administration roles this all could very easily undermine your ambitious skills plans over the coming years.

Despite the welcome recruitment campaign that your Department launched in January, the stark reality is that college funding has lagged so much behind schools and industry since 2010, that staff pay in colleges is inadequate. The increases in the 16 to 18 funding rate over the coming years are not sufficient to enable colleges to match school or industry pay, because the increase pays for more hours, covers less than half of college income, and adult funding rates have not changed for over a decade.

With inflation now over 5%, we were clear when we drafted the report that this challenge would only heighten, particularly with your clear plan to maintain the 97% threshold on Adult Education Budget despite the impact of the pandemic. Our estimate is that this might result in clawback by ESFA of between £30m and £50m alone next year, with potentially just as much more clawed back by devolved MCAs. Energy price rises as well are beginning to bite, with one college last week reporting a threefold increase in its gas bill from £106k to £330k.

Then we saw your own Department's submission to the School Teacher's Review Body (STRB) on the same day as our report was published and we realised that the challenge will be even harder to manage. Your detailed, evidenced and reasoned submission was of great interest, and in its focus on the importance of paying teachers/lecturers a fair rate for their services broadly reflects our views. I was particularly struck by this paragraph (par 3):

"A £30,000 starting salary and improved early career pay offer will improve the competitiveness of a career in teaching, raise the status of the profession, and provide a pay offer that better reflects the challenges experienced at this career stage, improving recruitment and retention and thus educational outcomes for pupils."

I would be very grateful if you would ask officials to consider our report in the context of your own submission to the STRB. If it is already a challenge to recruit, for instance, college lecturers when the average-pay differential between schools and colleges is over £9,000, I cannot imagine how much harder it will be when that gap widens further over the next few years.

It would be very helpful for AoC in its role (akin to the STRB) of making pay award recommendations, for your officials to carry out a similar analysis on college pay and staffing as the basis for a discussion with you. An analysis like that would help you discuss with us at AoC what the ambition should be for college pay and how it might be funded. Without that ambition, it will be increasingly difficult to show college staff that they are valued as much as their counterparts in schools. Without that ambition the pay gap will worsen, recruitment and retention will suffer even more and the skills plans you want to implement will be greatly hindered.

I look forward to discussing this with you in the very near future.

Yours sincerely

David Hughes