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FAO: JOINT TRADE UNION SIDE SECRETARIES

I am writing to you as the Joint Union Side Secretaries. As you will be aware, UCEA has recently sought indicative views from its member institutions on the 2020-21 pay round. This consultation has confirmed the significant extent of the financial challenges facing our subscribing institutions.

UCEA's members are fully aware of, and very grateful for, the efforts of staff across all higher education institutions who have helped the sector to cope with the unprecedented challenges created by the pandemic. However, the scale of the problem is such that many institutions face high levels of financial uncertainty, with the real potential for significant financial challenges in the 2020-21 year. While institutions will try their utmost to minimise the impact on jobs, for many this will be extremely difficult.

In order to plan effectively, institutions need to minimise the degree of uncertainty facing them. Given the sizable proportion of institution budgets dedicated to the workforce, our members have indicated that they require clarity on pay bill for 20-21 as soon as possible to help with their planning. If this is not resolved it will simply add further uncertainty.

In view of the likely forthcoming pressures facing the sector, UCEA now believes it would be unwise for there to be a pay uplift for the 2020-21 round. We recognise that this will be disappointing for you and your members. I must stress that the conclusion that there should not be a pay uplift this year has not been arrived at lightly by our members.

Given the shared interest between all of us concerned with the sector in achieving a sustainable future for it, our proposal is to seek your agreement to a pay freeze for 2020-21, with the exception of adjustments to those points on the spine necessary to meet statutory National Living Wage levels.

The scale of the potentially difficult financial situation facing the sector means that institutions need this certainty as soon as possible, without necessarily going through the full negotiating process. Giving institutions this clarity as quickly as we can will better position them to make decisions which minimise the impact on jobs. However, in doing so, we would emphasise UCEA's ongoing commitment to national collective bargaining and our intention to recommence negotiations in 2021-22, subject to that being possible at that time. In our view this is the best way of preserving the national collective bargaining machinery, both this year and beyond. In reaching such an agreement UCEA would be absolutely clear, on behalf of our members, that we remain committed to the New Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (New JNCHES) as the central committee for multi-employer negotiations and dialogue on pay and pay-related issues.

If this position could be agreed, we would suggest a continuing dialogue between UCEA and sector unions through the rest of this year, potentially following the format of our recent roundtable. This would allow us to monitor the financial situation as autumn unfolds and to share perspectives on the impact on the workforce. Such a dialogue would also help to inform our preparations for the 2021-22 negotiating round.

I appreciate that this is a difficult message to receive, but I hope that the Union Side will give it your fullest consideration, recognising the gravity of the situation. As we have emphasised previously, UCEA is committed to working with sector trade unions as we seek to deal with the challenges created by the pandemic.

I look forward to your response and, if it would be helpful, I am happy to discuss this with you further.

Best wishes,
Raj Jethwa – Chief Executive