

18 November 2024

Richard Leonard MSP
Public Audit Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Ref: GD/CM
Direct: 07801 887 820

Dear Mr Leonard,

Response to the Public Audit Committee's Questions on the Job Evaluation Process

Thank you for your letter dated 14 October 2024 regarding the National Job Evaluation Project for support staff in Scotland's colleges.

I am responding as Director of College Employers Scotland, and welcome the opportunity to address the Committee's concerns and provide clarity on the progress made, the challenges faced, and our plans for resolving this long-standing issue.

While I only started in post in April 2022, I acknowledge the significant historical delays in completing the job evaluation process and its impact on support staff, colleges, and stakeholders. This response provides context to the challenges faced, outlines the steps being taken to address them, and reaffirms our commitment to ensuring a fair and robust outcome.

1. Why has it taken almost ten years to progress the job evaluation process?

The job evaluation process began as a commitment within the 2015-16 Support Staff Pay Agreement and was further formalised in the 2017-18 Agreement. However, delays have been caused by several interrelated factors:

- **Lack of a Shared Objective:** Divergent interpretations of the Agreements between employers and trades unions created fundamental misalignment on whether the Agreements committed to national 'pay harmonisation' as an outcome of national job evaluation.
- **Governance Challenges:** The governance structure, which relied heavily on partnership working and joint project management, blurred decision-making responsibilities and often prioritised negotiation over adherence to best practice. This was further hampered by often poor industrial relations, in general, during this time period.
- **Process Design Flaws:** As the processes derived from a series of ongoing negotiations, they did not fully align with ACAS best practice guidelines.
- **Technical and Resource Limitations:** Those involved in the process lacked sufficient experience, expertise and training in national-scale job evaluation exercises, and insufficient use was made of external support from the job evaluation scheme provider. Resources were further stretched by a slower pace of analysis than planned (partly down to Facilities Time arrangements) and changes in the number of role analysts.

- **COVID-19 Pandemic:** The pandemic significantly disrupted project timelines between 2020 and 2021.

2. What is the timeline for the resolution of this exercise?

Constructive discussions with UNISON have taken place since March 2024 to develop a revised approach to the job evaluation process. These discussions continue to progress positively, considering recent internal governance changes at UNISON.

Employers recognise that more robust governance, clearer processes, and stronger leadership is necessary to mitigate the previous issues, and we are addressing these areas seeking:

- A commitment to utilising specialist technical expertise more fully.
- Enhanced governance, with clear roles and responsibilities and oversight.
- More comprehensive training and support for those involved in the process.

While live discussions with trades unions are ongoing, we estimate that completing the job evaluation process, including the evaluation of new or changed roles, will require approximately 18–24 months from the point of agreement.

We are working to finalise a detailed timeline in collaboration with trade unions and stakeholders to ensure realistic and achievable milestones.

3. Will the job evaluation process include the provision of back pay, and if so, when will this be backdated to?

Yes, there is a Collective Agreement between support staff trade unions and employers which commits to the effective date of new grades deriving from the National Job Evaluation exercise being from 1 September 2018. This date, therefore, marks the time from which any back pay may be due to staff.

The financial implications of this are significant, and we are working closely with the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and UNISON on this commitment.

Steps to Address Past Challenges and Ensure Future Success

We recognise that the issues raised by the Committee are systemic and require a comprehensive response. Key actions include:

1. **Revised Governance:** Establishing a clear governance framework with defined roles, responsibilities, and oversight to ensure decisions are made objectively and efficiently.
2. **Stakeholder Alignment:** Resolving the misalignment on the 2017 Agreement's objectives and fostering a collaborative environment with trade unions to rebuild trust.
3. **Process Redesign:** Overhauling the job evaluation process to align with best practices, including enhanced evidence collection, consensus-building techniques, and robust quality assurance.
4. **Training and Support:** Delivering training for those involved in the process to ensure consistency and competency.
5. **Funding Strategy:** Collaborating with the Scottish Government and SFC to address the financial implications of pay adjustments and back pay.

Conclusion

We want to reassure the Committee that colleges are fair work employers and are committed to resolving the issue of job evaluation for support staff promptly and equitably. We recognise the importance of providing certainty to support staff and colleges on this issue while safeguarding the financial sustainability of the sector.

Thank you for your continued oversight and engagement in this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

Gavin Donoghue
Director of College Employers Scotland