

## Submission 2, dated 22 March 2022

As you are no doubt aware, 11 Scottish universities are taking industrial action in disputes over pensions, pay, and working conditions. By the end of this week, fifteen days will have been lost to strike action and UCU is balloting members to extend the strike mandate. The current student cohort has not known a single calendar year without industrial action. And yet university leaders still refuse to engage with staff.

I am therefore writing to you to request a full Committee Inquiry into the management of Scotland's universities. I am deeply concerned that the current impasse is due to failures of governance that are prolonging the dispute unnecessarily.

The issues are, admittedly, complex, and I have included a short briefing note with this letter which summarises the main points. But I would like to also include a personal testimony of what it is like to work in higher education at present.

I love my job. I am committed to providing the best possible education for my students and I know my colleagues feel this as deeply as I do. But the sector's addiction to short-term contracts and intransigence in the face of pay gaps concerning gender, race, and disability threatens to fatally undermine this. I am fortunate to hold an open-ended contract. But this security is denied to the vast majority of my junior colleagues, for whom a sustainable career in HE has become akin to passing through the eye of a needle. Many excellent academics are leaving the profession; hardly any of the PhD students I met now consider academia a viable option. Those who remain risk serial burnout.

For the university, however, education (and much else) has become a no more than a transaction in which staff contribution is seriously devalued. This is evident in the culture of management and materially: on 1st April the changes to the USS pension scheme will cut 40% of my pension, leaving me fearful for my future in retirement.

Many students have expressed their support for striking staff, and their dismay at the way the university has handled the dispute. Last week, one student wrote to me:

"I just wanted to express my full support and solidarity for the striking staff who are fighting to secure the future of higher education. I think it's a complete disgrace that USS have gone ahead with the pension cuts, and I fully understand and stand in solidarity with the union's decision to escalate next week. Each year of my degree has been affected by industrial action [...]. I'm appalled by the university management's attempts to pit students against striking staff when their push to marketise the university treats students as nothing more than cash cows."

Yet it does not have to be like this. In October 2021 Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal told a senior management meeting of the “larger than expected fiscal surplus” because “we thought we would have to contribute a lot more money to the USS pension scheme ...which is, of course, fantastic news”. Yet, more recently, Principal Peter Mathieson continues to insist that the University and College Union (UCU)’s compromise proposals are ‘unaffordable’.

I have repeatedly raised my concerns with Professor Mathieson, only to receive either generic responses or silence. It seems that, across the sector, university managers have decided to tolerate the ongoing disruption regardless of the impact on students, staff or the reputation of Scottish universities.

I therefore believe that Parliamentary scrutiny can help understand the underlying causes of the current dispute with a view to securing the resolution that we need. I understand from the minutes of the Education, Children and Young People Committee meeting of 8th March that you are considering gathering evidence on universities. A full Committee inquiry would provide the best scrutiny of the fiscal position of Scotland’s universities, of managers’ claims of pension ‘unaffordability’, and of their ongoing dependence on insecure contracts and indefensible pay gaps.

I know this Committee cannot resolve the current dispute. But an inquiry is in our common interest to better understand decisions being taken in Scotland, regarding the governance of Scotland’s universities, with clear and deleterious outcomes for staff and students alike.