

## Submission 4, dated 22 March 2022

As a tutor for the University of Edinburgh, trying to make ends meet for my family, this strike action is very important to helping my life.

You will be aware of the industrial action currently taking place at 11 universities across Scotland, in disputes over pensions, pay and working conditions. Most university branches of the UCU are due to strike for a further 5 days this month, on top of 10 days taken so far this year. It is not an exaggeration to say that, with 6000 members of university staff on strike, there is currently a crisis in Scottish Universities.

We are writing the Education, Children and Young People Committee to request a full Committee inquiry into the management of Scotland's universities. We think there are failures of governance that have both brought us to the present crisis and, through inaction, are sustaining it. We believe that Parliamentary scrutiny can help understand the underlying causes of the current dispute with a view to a securing the resolution that we need.

The dimensions of the crisis are complex. There are issues around pay, job insecurity, unmanageable workloads and yawning pay gaps concerning gender (15.5%), race (17%) and disability (9%). It should concern this committee that universities are now founded on the rampant use of insecure contracts, serious equality failings, staff burnout and falling pay. Such circumstances cannot deliver the best for students in Scotland, which is why our campaign has the support of the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland.

A driver of the current dispute is an attack on members of the private USS fund, some of whose members are having their pensions cut by a staggering 42%. The pension issue is complex but at the heart of it is a dysfunction in governance that affects all of Scotland's universities: that the USS fund is, I believe, being managed by leaders to the fiscal advantage of institutions rather than for the benefit of its members in retirement.

While some of these issues are at a UK level, there are dimensions which are particular to Scotland's higher education sector. For instance, there are what I believe are troubling discrepancies between public and private statements given by leaders at the University of Edinburgh.

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'. Logically, only one or other of these positions can be true; we think this variance raises important questions.

We note in the minutes of the Education, Children and Young People Committee meeting of 8th March that you are considering gathering evidence on universities. We think 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.

We 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.