

Submission 12, dated 24 March 2022

I am writing to you to ask for the Education, Children and Young People Committee to convene an inquiry into Scottish University actions with regard to staff pay and working conditions, and staff pensions. The occasion for this letter is the ongoing industrial dispute between the University College Union and Universities UK/UCEA. While I do recognise that the Committee cannot resolve this dispute, it can examine the actions Universities have taken to resolve or prolong the dispute. Apologies for the length of this letter: the key request is in the opening paragraph. I have been an employee at a university since 2012 and during this time have witnessed a marked decline in governance, transparency around decision-making, and working conditions, which particularly affects those on lower pay grades and fixed-term contracts. I am now seeing excellent colleagues prepare to leave the higher education sector, and many others in great financial and emotional distress. The university's executive appears to have a plan to improve our conditions and address staff/student ratios. **I am therefore writing to request your support in calling for Parliamentary scrutiny of the university sector's mismanagement of pay and working conditions, and employers' contribution to detrimental changes to the USS pension scheme.** I was pleased read that Katy Clark's motion on precarious employment received cross-party support at Holyrood, and I would be grateful if you could build on that support by calling for the Education, Children and Young People Committee to convene an inquiry into university governance. I also hope that MSPs will ask University Principals what they are doing to resolve the industrial disputes between UCU and UUK/UCEA.

You will probably be aware that there are two disputes, one over pensions, and the other over pay and conditions. At the time of writing, UCU Edinburgh members are on strike over both disputes; when we return to work, we will be taking action short of strike, which means we will only be working our contracted hours and refusing any voluntary work. Our sector runs on goodwill and voluntary extra work, and it will prove impossible to complete business-critical work should action short of a strike continue for any significant period of time. This matter is therefore urgent.

The pensions dispute affects early career staff and staff on the lowest pay grades most of all, and - because women and people of colour are under-represented at the higher salary grades - has a particularly strong impact on these groups. For example, at the University of Edinburgh, as a grade 9 academic with ten years' continuous employment, in my early 40s, my guaranteed pension income has been cut by c.20% and I can expect around £16000 to 17000 in retirement according to the pension scheme's modeller; a new lecturer in their 30s can expect to see their guaranteed, defined benefit pension cut by 35% and will receive a lower guaranteed pension income. Colleagues on lower salaries will be seriously affected, whether they are early or late-career. The new scheme has a 2.5% inflation cap, which will obviously not be sufficient to protect the real value of pension income over time. USS pension scheme members (including those not in the UCU) were consulted on the new scheme and did not give support, yet the USS Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) was not permitted to consider UCU's alternative proposals because employers refused to issue covenant support for them, even though the alternative proposals could not have cost more than the current scheme. It remains unclear how university leaders reached the decision to support the current scheme rather than carry out a new valuation of the scheme and consider alternatives. Nor have university leaders made any public statements on the equality aspects of this dispute. The University of Edinburgh's Principal's public statements suggest he thinks the new scheme is necessary to address a structural deficit, but that

deficit has shrunk dramatically since the most recent valuation, which was conducted in March 2020, during a market crash.

The second dispute, known as 'four fights', is over pay and working conditions, particularly the widespread misuse of short-term contracts and inequity within higher education. These contracts are increasingly common in all aspects of university work, not just teaching: for example, at the University of Edinburgh, in July 2020, 22.5% of all staff were on guaranteed hours contracts. There are also significant disparities with regard to gender, race and ethnicity, and disability: broadly, women, BAME, and disabled employees are more likely to be at lower grades, on precarious 'guaranteed hours' or fixed-term contracts. At the University of Edinburgh, according to the EDMARC Staff Report for 2019-20, there is a larger proportion of BAME staff than white staff on fixed term contracts, and there are smaller proportions of BAME academic and professional staff at higher grades than lower grades. 41% of women at the University of Edinburgh are on fixed-term contracts, whereas 34% of men are on these contracts. 64% of grade 6 academic staff are women, but only 27% of grade 10 (professor grade) are women. Many early-to-mid career staff have never received a pay rise that was in line with inflation. Many of my own peers, who began working in universities around the same time as me, have never held an open-ended contract, have no prospect of promotion, and have had to postpone their hopes of buying homes or having families, because of lack of security. In my own area of work, many colleagues with significant teaching and leadership responsibilities are on recurring 9 or 10-month contracts: these colleagues are employed only during the teaching semester, and are not employed during the summer months: their teaching preparation takes place during their 'free time', or is compressed into the 9/10 month period for which they are paid, which affects the quality of teaching they can provide.

At the time of writing, UCEA (which represents universities) has not even agreed to open discussions with UCU about 'casualisation' (the increasing, in my view, (mis)use of precarious contracts in higher education) and inequality. I believe that this second dispute could be resolved quickly if UCEA agreed to work with UCU on a national framework to improve pay and conditions, and would agree to treat casualisation as a widespread structural problem that is having a negative effect on staff workload, job security, and quality of life. It necessarily also affects the student experience, as our students have noted in their messages of support.

While the pensions dispute attracts the most attention nationally, the 'four fights' dispute speaks to slow erosion of pay and working conditions that has now become intolerable. Colleagues are falling ill and burning out; in pursuit of 'growth' and vanity projects, student: staff ratios have not been monitored and now mean that staff struggle to support students adequately. Staff have raised concerns about strategy and governance internally, to no avail: there seems to be no mechanism to ensure that leadership teams address structural problems, and their public statements claim that they have no room to manoeuvre. (This despite our leadership teams' active engagement with national consultations over pay and conditions, and (contradictory) public statements about healthy financial surpluses.) The problems that the university sector faces are complex and structural. No doubt they will be complex to address, but the first step is to acknowledge that current conditions are not optimal and agree to work to address them nationally, with concrete targets and an agreed timeframe.

I am writing to you because our own University's senior leadership team does not appear to be willing to engage in any substantive discussion about either dispute, or their rationale for supporting UUK and UCEA's positions. I am seriously concerned about failures of leadership and governance in the Scottish higher education sector, and I would welcome

Parliamentary scrutiny of our universities' real fiscal positions, their claims that they cannot afford to limit their over-reliance on precarious contracts, and the distinct lack of urgency with which they are tackling structural inequalities affecting women, BAME, and disabled staff in particular. Staff pay, workload, and working conditions should have been a priority since these worrying disparities were first reported; in the absence of action from our leadership teams, I would be grateful for Parliamentary scrutiny to force the conversation into the open.