

Submission 7, dated 24 March 2022

I'm a Professor at Heriot-Watt University, where I have devoted over 20 years of my life to research and teaching future generations of urban planners and designers, architectural engineers, and geographers. You may already have heard from some of my academic colleagues regarding our concerns about the current crisis in Scottish universities.

My dedication to my job has kept me going in the face of increasingly unmanageable working conditions and workloads. My salary has declined year on year for over a decade. And now my employer, in concert with the trustees of the Universities Superannuation Scheme, are attempting to take away around 32% of my future pension.

This is a dispute that has been rumbling on for 4 years, affecting an entire generation of students – on top of the pandemic.

I am writing to you to ask you to support a full Committee inquiry into the management of Scotland's universities. I think there are failures of governance that have both brought us to the present crisis and, through inaction, are sustaining it. I also think 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, I believe, a dysfunction in governance that affects all of Scotland's universities: that the USS fund is 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. I 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. I know this Committee cannot resolve the current dispute. But an inquiry is in our common interest to better understand current decisions being taken in Scotland, regarding the governance of Scotland's universities, with clear and deleterious outcomes for staff and students alike.

It seems that Scotland's universities principals are largely orientated to the UniversitiesUK umbrella body and are indifferent to the public sentiment here in

Scotland. I'd like to see them held accountable to the community that they purport to serve. I hope Parliament may have the authority and willingness to do this.