

Submission 10, dated 25 March 2022

You will no doubt 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 so far this year. The union is re-balloting now for further action, likely to include a marking boycott, preventing students from graduating. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that, with 6000 members of university staff on strike, and an entire cohort of students at Scottish Universities having had their education disrupted, there is currently a crisis in Scottish Universities.

The dispute reflects a series of challenges that have resulted in historically low staff morale, including the facts that staff pay has fallen by 20% in real-terms across the sector over the past twelve years; pensions have been cut by in many cases 35%, and over a third of academic staff are on fixed term contracts. As you will no doubt appreciate these conditions inevitably have an effect on the experience of the 50,000 students who study in Scotland each year.

I appreciate that the Committee cannot resolve the dispute itself, but it could act in a constructive way to facilitate a resolution by asking the leaders of Scotland's universities to account for their decisions and actions. For example, at the University of Edinburgh, there are inconsistencies in the accounts given for the refusal to engage with the UCU on pensions. Principal Peter Mathieson insists that the University and College Union (UCU)'s compromise proposals are 'unaffordable' but in October 2021 Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal, told a senior management meeting of the "larger than expected fiscal surplus" (£113million last year) because "we thought we would have to contribute a lot more money to the USS pension scheme ...which is, of course, fantastic news".

It seems to me that, with the increasing number of staff on casualised contracts, the negative impact that has on students, and with surveys showing that [over half of higher education staff are showing signs of depression](#), the reputation of Scotland's higher education sector is under threat.

A [new report](#) carried out by UCU has found:

- two-thirds of respondents said they are likely or very likely to leave the university sector in the next five years over pension cuts, pay and working conditions.
- almost nine in 10 (88%) of respondents said they are not optimistic or not at all optimistic about the future of higher education in the UK

This is a devastating indictment of how universities have been managed in the UK, including in Scotland, over the last decade and more. An inquiry by your committee is desperately needed to investigate how it's come to this and how to put things right.

Addendum to submission, September 2022

Pay

[The most recent final offer made by Universities and Colleges Employers Association \(UCEA\)](#) (3%) is well below inflation (which stands at [RPI 11.8% as of June 2022](#)). This means yet another real terms pay cut for staff during the cost of living crisis in the United Kingdom.

The value of pay in higher education fell by 17.6% relative to inflation between 2009 and 2019. Based on the employers' offer of 3% and the most recent inflation data, that figure is now approximately **25%**. With inflation forecast to keep increasing in the short to medium term, salaries will continue to fall further and further short of the cost of living.

Pensions

As noted above, the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) used a March 2020 valuation, as markets were crashing during the COVID-19 pandemic, to claim that contribution rates needed to increase significantly and, as a result, [UUK pushed through major cuts](#) to the guaranteed, defined benefit (DB) element of the scheme to prevent employers from having to pay higher contributions.

[New research](#) shows that global loss across current USS scheme members is £16-18bn, with those under the age of 40 losing between £100k-£200k each in retirement. It also shows that 196,000 staff will lose between 30%-35% from their guaranteed future retirement income.

What's more, a [drastic improvement to USS finances was revealed by the trustee in March 2022](#): USS reported assets increasing to over £88bn, and the trustee said that growth outstripped liabilities and that the level of contributions required to service the deficit fell to 0%. **There was never ever need for these draconian cuts!**

Working conditions

[UCU's 2021 workload survey \(published June 2022\)](#) showed that academic staff are working on average 51.3 FTE hours per week (i.e. more than 2 unpaid days each week), academic-related professional services (ARPS) staff are working an average of 44.4 FTE hours per week (i.e. equivalent of one additional unpaid day every week), and staff on fractional contracts can be working 2-3 times the hours that they are paid for each week. Workload has been exacerbated too by ever-increasing administrative burden, reduction in staff members, and the COVID-related changes to teaching and learning: 33% of higher education respondents said their workload was unmanageable most of the time or entirely unmanageable.

We thought we were struggling in March. The crisis is now even bigger.