

Submission 1, dated 21 March 2022

I'm a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. You may already have heard from some of my academic colleagues regarding our concerns about the current crisis in Scottish universities.

I love my job but in the last few years, working conditions and workloads have become unmanageable. My salary has declined year on year for over a decade. And now I believe that my employer, in concert with the trustees of the Universities Superannuation Scheme, are attempting to take away nearly 40% of my 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 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 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. For instance, there 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; I think this variance raises important questions.

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 Universities UK 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.

Addendum to submission – September 2022

We are once again being balloted on strike action as a result of an imposed real-terms pay cut from our employers. Our pay has fallen 25% since 2009; we continue work with excessive unaddressed workloads and endure widespread casualisation.

Scottish Universities continue to pay millions to correct a pension deficit that was grounded in what I believe was a patently flawed USS valuation which projected a shortfall of £14 billion; this has since evaporated. The scheme is now in surplus and yet a typical member is set to lose 35% of their guaranteed income.