The future of Scottish higher education

A briefing for the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections

March 2021

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union in the post-16 education sector in the UK, representing over 130,000 academic and related members across the UK, and is the largest union in the higher education sector in Scotland with over 9,000 members.

INTRODUCTION

The 2021 Scottish Parliament elections will take place at a time of crisis for the country with the Covid-19 pandemic, and with an economic crisis and increasing unemployment looming. Universities and the higher education sector are unique in being central to both challenges facing the country. Universities and their staff have been key both to developing medical and public health responses to the pandemic and advising governments, and are central to driving the economic recovery. As a prime economic driver, universities need to be creating and maintaining directly employed jobs in towns and cities across the country and in the wider economy, preparing and developing the skills of tomorrow's workers, as well as adults returning to learning.

UCU branches and members are encouraged to use this manifesto to contact their local candidates in the Scottish Parliament elections. This document outlines UCU Scotland's demands from politicians and the next Parliament and Scottish Government.

UCU is calling for the next Scottish Government to:

- Fully fund Scottish higher education, including the full cost of teaching.

- Cut the use of precarious, casualised contracts.

- Take action on runaway principals' pay.

- Universities to sign up to the Fair Work agenda.

- Lower student-staff ratios, so there is a maximum number of students per staff to enhance the student experience and reduce spiralling staff workloads.

- Reaffirm the Commission on Widening Access' targets for fair access.

- Set up a task group on automation and datafication.

- Renew our efforts to tackle inequality and discrimination on campus.

- Action on climate change including a joint statement by universities, students, and trade unions.

- Ensure our universities continue to be outward looking institutions, welcoming students, staff and ideas from across the globe.

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING

Underpinning everything else is the fact that the sector in Scotland needs to be properly funded. There is a longstanding hole in higher education funding in Scotland which predates the current pandemic. The full cost of delivering university tuition to Scottish

domiciled is not currently met by public funding. The 2019 report[1] finances from Audit Scotland found that for 2015/16 universities, on average, recovered only 93.4% of the full cost of teaching from public funds.

UCU wholly supports the concept of free tuition and that access to higher education should be based on your ability to learn and not your ability to pay. It does, however, need to be properly funded. The ongoing Scottish Funding Council review is set to review the funding of both further and higher education, this is an opportunity for the next Scottish Government to properly address the shortfall in teaching funding in Scottish universities.

While the overall funding level of Scottish higher education, and the teaching level in particular is in need of reform, the way that funding is allocated can also have negative consequences for specific subject areas. We have seen cuts to language teaching in Scottish universities threatened at universities including Dundee, Napier and Heriot Watt universities in this academic year; and in 2017 Strathclyde university cut courses in Italian and German. Cutting the provision of language teaching is the exact opposite of what we should be doing given Brexit. The current funding model for languages makes them comparably unattractive for universities. UCU urges the next Scottish Government to review funding for language teaching given the threat to these subjects.

FAIR WORK

The Scottish Government has been instrumental in championing the concept of Fair Work in recent years. Launching the fair work convention in 2015, with a view to ensuring by 2025 (in the lifespan of the next Parliament) that workers in Scotland will enjoy a 'world leading working life where fair work drives success, wellbeing and prosperity…'

While the sector has made some progress to reduce casualisation in some institutions, the use of precarious contracts remains widespread. The sector needs to do more to truly live up to the Fair Work standards that would benefit students and staff in the sector. With higher education in Scotland the beneficiary of over £1billion in public funding annually, UCU believes that the Scottish Government should use its influence over the sector to ensure that universities as employers sign up to and make a statement with trade unions in the sector committing to the principle of fair work as defined by the Scottish Government.

CASUALISATION

Casualisation in higher education sees universities favouring insecure contracts over permanent or open-ended ones. As figures from UCU show, around half (54%) of all academic staff in UK universities are employed on insecure contracts. The practice of using precarious employment for delivering core business of a university negatively impacts not just the health and wellbeing of staff, but the quality of education and research themselves.

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[1] https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/uploads/docs/report/2019/nr_190919_finances_universities.pdf

THE REALITIES OF CASUALISATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

While employers argue that precarious contracts are 'flexible', staff themselves disagree. A 2015 survey of staff on insecure contracts carried out by UCU reveals significant numbers of them struggling to get by: 17% of respondents say that they struggle to pay for food, 34% that they struggle to pay rent or mortgage repayments, and 36% that they struggle to pay household bills like fuel, electricity, water and repairs.[2]

UCU branches in universities and have and are running campaigns on campuses across Scotland, and have had some successes in negotiating collective agreements to reduce casualisation.[3] There is also a clear role for government in addressing precarity. While employment law remains reserved, UCU believes that the new Scottish Government should use its leverage as the major funder of Scottish higher education, and use policy levers to significantly reduce the number of casual contracts in the sector.

HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

While the main aspects of the 2011 von Prondzynski review of higher education governance were taken forward by the 2016 Higher Education Governance Act there were many which were not. These include action of runaway principals pay. We have principals on £342,000 a year - more than twice the salary of the First Minister, and some principals have received pay rises in a single year of 33%. This is unsustainable, wrong and sets principals and senior managers apart from the rest of university staff.

The review also called the establishment of a centre for higher education research in Scotland, a call most recently given weight by the first Scottish Funding Council report on the cohesion and sustainability of higher education which commented on the lack of research into both Scottish further and higher education.

The pandemic shone exposed weaknesses in the way universities are run and structured: for example on finance and the overdependence on international student fee income. Revisiting the unfinished business of the von Prondzynski review – including principals' pay - would help build on the good work done in the Higher Education Governance Act of 2016.

FAIR ACCESS

In late December 2020 the Commissioner for Fair Access published a report outlining the impact of the Covid crisis on fair access and the challenges the pandemic will bring to the progress made since the commission on widening access reported in 2016. UCU believes that the report's recommendations, including the use of targets for the sector, are behind much of the progress. We would want to see the new Scottish Government reaffirm its and the sector's commitment to fair access and the commission's targets up to 2030.

[2] University and College Union (2015), Making ends meet: The human cost of casualisation in post-secondary education (London: UCU), www.ucu.org.uk/media/7279/Making-ends-meet---the-human-cost-of-casualisation-in-post-secondary-education-May-15/pdf/ucu_makingendsmeet_may15.pdf

[3] https://www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/ue_ucu_collective_agreement_re_gh_ftcs_26_march_2019.pdf

AUTOMATION

The Covid-19 crisis has seen teaching and university activities move online in an unparalleled way and at great speed to ensure that students continued to be supported in exceptionally difficult circumstances. Examples like online and remote teaching have been driven by the pandemic, but beyond these, the full impact of wider automation and learning technologies are increasingly visible to workers in universities. These include lecture capture, automation in university libraries, the use of data analytics and machine learning algorithms.

Many areas of automation will be positive but there are others that need to be treated with caution. Do students appreciate the impact of aspects of learning analytics, including who holds data on them and what decisions are made about them and by whom? There are also legitimate concerns about the increased number of private, global companies seeking profit and data harvesting from universities, potentially impacting on the nature of universities themselves and their purpose. Universities are not commercial entities and their focus should always be on delivering a public good through education and research foremost, rather than an enabler for private sector profit.

UCU believes that to better understand the impact of automation and data analytics on the sector, the next Scottish Government should establish a joint task group. The group should include datafication and automation experts, education experts, and trade unions, to identify the benefits and drawbacks of the automation in higher education and universities.

ADDITIONAL AREAS FOR SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT TO ENCOURAGE ACTION FROM UNIVERSITIES

In addition to the issues identified above, where there is a direct locus for Scottish Government intervention and action, there are a number of proposals relating to universities and higher education institutions where universities themselves should be taking action. There is scope for Scottish Government to act as an agent of change. For example, there has been recent positive movement around widening access to higher education. While there is no direct role for government to instruct universities who to admit to study, by the use of commissions and working groups the Scottish Government has positively led this change in institutions. We would want to see the next Scottish Government similarly using its 'soft' influence in the following areas:

Quality measures are the metrics universities use to ensure that work taking place is of sufficient standard and, in the case of research, to determine how funding is allocated. Currently this is based around the National Student Survey, the Research Excellence Framework, and for a minority of Scottish institutions, the Teaching Excellence Framework. All of these measures are problematic and open to criticism around equality measures and how they benefit higher education or the student experience. UCU believes that there are better measures which could be used and what would more meaningfully evidence quality. For example judging universities on student:staff ratios, and the number of staff on casualised contracts, would do more to measure the quality of

teaching experience students receive, than an arbitrary survey which seems to discriminate against women and BAME staff and where universities commonly need to incentivise students to participate.

Equality measures The 2019 Equality and Human Rights Commission report into universities found a quarter of BAME students had suffered racial harassment since the start of their studies. These findings have been confirmed by work carried out by individual institutions. We know that Black staff are subject to a race pay gap, and that a gender pay gap also exists in the sector. Likewise, we know that there is chronic under disclosure by university staff of disabilities with only 5% of staff in Scotland recognised as disabled compared with 19% of the population. It is hard to ascertain the scope of ableism, sexism and racism in institutions, but to engender wider equality practices in the sector a start could be made by seeking to decolonise the curriculum; Review existing equality, diversity and inclusion policies with a view to incorporating or replacing with active anti-racism, anti-ableism and anti-sexism measures; encourage greater consideration of accessibility and inclusivity internally within universities' structures; and encourage universities to review and rewrite guidance for workplace equality.

Universities also have a key role in Scotland meeting sustainability targets and addressing the climate emergency. Individual institutions themselves need to take steps to curtail their own carbon footprint, but universities also are pivotal in research into climate change and the move to a zero-carbon economy. UCU has been involved in the Just Transition Partnership, working to ensure that moving towards a zero-carbon economy doesn't impact detrimentally on workers currently employed in sectors facing change and that the new jobs created are well paid and unionised. We want to see universities join trade unions and student bodies in a collective, sector wide calling for a sustainable future.

The Scottish Government has also been instrumental to arguing for Scotland to remain part of Erasmus plus scheme. It is important that pushing on this, and the wider ambition that our universities are, and must remain international post Brexit remain a priority for the new Scottish Government.

This briefing contains some of the key policy ideas in a longer paper produced by the UCU Scotland education committee. The committee focus on areas of Scottish higher education policy. The full paper titled The future of Scottish higher education - An alternative vision for universities[4] is available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11371/Future-of-Scottish-HE-Feb-21/pdf/Future_of_Scottish_HE_Feb_21.pdf

For more information on any of the areas in this paper or for advice on contacting candidates in your areas please contact Murdo Mathison, UCU Scotland policy and communications officer by email: mmathison@ucu.org.uk

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[4] https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/11371/Future-of-Scottish-HE-Feb-21/pdf/Future_of_Scottish_HE_Feb_21.pdf