

MANIFESTO 2024



UCU Scotland priorities for the next UK government

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Scottish higher education and the general election

Higher education is devolved and many of UCU Scotland's demands are directed to the Scottish government rather than to the incoming Westminster government that will be elected in this UK general election. There are major aspects and drivers of policy which remain reserved to the UK government which influence and impact upon universities, UCU members, students and their families in Scotland.

Section one of this manifesto relates to funding issues, which are devolved and the responsibility of the Scottish government and parliament. It is important that prospective MPs understand the chronic underfunding of Scottish higher education and the impact this is having upon universities, staff, and students in the constituencies they are seeking to represent.

Other sections in this manifesto relate to issues that are reserved and more directly the responsibility of the UK government, including immigration policy and employment legislation. This manifesto focuses on the main elements of the union's UK manifesto relevant to Scotland, and outlines UCU Scotland's very real concerns around higher education funding.

Members and branches are encouraged to contact candidates standing for the UK Parliament in Scottish constituencies to discuss and question them on their and their party's views on the higher education policies outlined in this manifesto.

Introduction

Education is transformative – both for individuals and for wider society. Learning broadens our horizons, while improving our wellbeing and our productivity. It is a long-term investment in our economy, it is vital to our employers, and it will shape the future for everyone.

Now more than ever, the people we teach are the people who will help the world respond to shared global crises. They will help find a way through the social justice and equality challenges we face. They will support the health and wellbeing of an ageing population. They will develop our approach to living and working with Artificial Intelligence and our response to the increasing damage caused by the climate emergency.

Any barriers which make accessing education too difficult for some simply cap our potential to respond to these challenges. Any conditions which harm the experience of those in education, whether staff or students, will only put limits on our ability to navigate our way through the shared challenges we face.

After the damage caused by more than a decade of real-terms cuts and marketisation in Scotland and across the rest of the UK, this manifesto outlines a series of proposals for radical reform, underpinned by a set of key principles, to ensure that we have an education system that works for everyone. We urge politicians to work with UCU Scotland to build on this vision.



Five principles for a fairer post-school education system

- 1 Education must be funded fairly and sustainably**
- 2 Regulation must be an enabler of excellence, not a barrier to it**
- 3 Good working conditions result in positive outcomes for staff and students**
- 4 Fairness and inclusion must be at the heart of our education system and our society**
- 5 Professional autonomy in the education sector must be supported and respected**



Principle 1:

Education should be funded fairly and sustainably

How should we do this?

- Demand the Scottish government fully funds Scotland's universities and covers the increased employer costs of the Scottish Teachers' Pension Scheme
- If additional money is needed on top of public expenditure, explore employers being required to contribute to the cost of higher education

Funding Scottish higher education – A decade of underinvestment

Education is a public good, which should be publicly funded. The costs of education should never be a barrier to learning, and UCU believes that the funding model in Scotland rightly reflects the benefit of higher education to society as well as to the individual. UCU wholly supports the policy of free tuition, and the belief that access to education should not rely on your ability to pay. However, we acknowledge that for at least the past decade the cost of teaching in our universities has been underfunded by the Scottish government with funding per student falling in real terms by 39% since 2014/15¹.

This underfunding of teaching, and research, in Scotland's universities has led to increasing discontent and calls by some to revise the funding model. UCU believes that the current funding model is the right one, but that, if politicians want to take credit for the popular policy of free tuition, then they need to properly pay for it.

Politicians and candidates will often ask 'how the shortfall of money is to be made up in a fixed budget?' UCU Scotland supports the work of the STUC on fair and progressive taxation.² Research by London Economics for UCU has shown that affordable reform is possible.³ A 3% rise in corporation tax or just a 1% rise in employer national insurance contributions for graduate employees, could provide a practical route for more money to fund education, relieving pressure on students and institutions, while ensuring



employers are paying their fair share. An employer higher education levy would ensure additional funding for higher education and mean that, on top of public funding, employers also pay a fair share for building a skilled workforce.

Modern 'Post 92' universities and the Scottish Teachers' Pension Scheme

A worrying consequence of the most recent cuts to the higher education sector is the impact on the modern 'post-92 institutions'. These institutions are very reliant on public funding and have traditionally done much of the heavy lifting on widening access, ensuring that students from non-traditional backgrounds, reach, progress and graduate successfully.

Post-92 universities by law enroll their teaching staff in the Scottish Teachers' Pension Scheme (STPS), the same pension scheme as college lecturers and school teachers. STPS is a UK government backed pension scheme and a recent valuation led to the employer costs for the pension increasing by 3%. In effect this is another cut to universities' funding.

UCU and the employers asked the Scottish government to support post-92s with these additional costs, but this has not happened, indeed the recent budget cut funding to post-92s, meaning that vital funds are being redirected out of an already underfunded sector back to the Treasury.

Principle 2:

Regulation and funding should be an enabler of excellence, not a barrier to it

How should we do this?

- **Ensure the independence of the Scottish Funding Council and scrap the flawed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and Research Excellence Framework (REF)**

A priority for UCU at UK level is reforming the Office for Students. The Office for Students has no locus in Scotland, where many of the functions are carried out by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

The SFC is currently the subject of reform following the 2023 Withers Review⁴ into Scotland's skills delivery landscape. UCU supports measures to enhance the skills landscape in Scotland, including reviewing the various funding bodies, but believes that any successor body to the SFC - which retains the function of funding the Scottish higher education sector - needs to retain the SFC's current independent status and autonomy, be free from direct ministerial control, consult with relevant stakeholders including trade unions, and retain the statutory requirement to act as an independent advisor to Ministers.

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is deeply unpopular and is failing students as a poor proxy for quality. It is hardly used in the Scottish sector in any case, and we support its abolition.

Research in our universities is under strain due to the declining unit of resource for teaching as well as falling success rates for research grants. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) ingrains inequality, discourages innovation and represents a drain on the time and resources of staff.



Instead, we need an enabling peer review model which supports teaching and research at all levels, underpinned by a funding model which provides greater stability and reduced bureaucracy for teaching as well as ambitious and cutting-edge research.

We call on the next UK government to scrap TEF and plans for REF 2029 and to consider new approaches to funding and regulation, including exploration of universal basic research funding for academics.

Principle 3:

Good working conditions result in positive outcomes for staff and students

How should we do this?

- Repeal anti-trade union legislation
- Treat postgraduate researchers (PGRs) as staff
- End the endemic casualisation in post-16 education

Repeal anti-trade union laws

Unfair working conditions have been paired with hostility towards trade unions from the current UK government in a transparent attempt to silence working people. Instead of engaging constructively with people who just want to be able to work to the best of their ability, in safe and fair environments, the UK government has made laws which stifle the voices of working people and reduce their capacity to push for improved working lives. Such a flagrant attack on our democracy should be of concern to us all.

A well performing education sector can only be achieved if the conditions to enable it are in place. Staff who are overworked, underpaid or working in dangerous, unsafe environments, cannot work to the best of their ability. Laws which prevent people challenging these conditions are damaging both to individual staff and to the health of our public services, including education.

UCU is deeply concerned about the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act and the possible inclusion of higher education under the Act's provisions, meaning that striking university workers could be forced back to work against their will.

In a Scottish context it is important to note that the Scottish government has, rightly, indicated that it would not issue work notices arguing that the Act and its provisions do not align with the principles of fair work. The Scottish government's refusal is welcome, meaning the provision will not apply to schools, hospitals etc. Universities are



independent of government and in the case of higher education in Scotland any decision on using work notices would be made by individual universities rather than Scottish government ministers.

The incoming UK government should repeal the Act. If they will not do so then the Scottish government must indicate to universities, on condition of funding, that they should not use the powers of the Act to force university workers to strike break.

The next UK government must repeal this dangerous and undemocratic anti-trade union legislation.

Treat postgraduate researchers (PGRs) as members of staff

Postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are the backbone of the higher education sector. They do the same work as university staff without the reward, recognition, protections and pay.

Despite this lack of recognition and fair pay, PGRs contribute significantly to the sector. They work on world-changing research that can make a real difference to people's lives and contribute fresh insights and perspectives. They do the hard work necessary to bring research ideas to fruition, all while teaching and training students.

If PGRs were not doing this work, the impact would be catastrophic for the ability of universities to meet the needs and expectations of their undergraduate students.

The UK and Scottish governments should ensure that universities stop exploiting the expertise and drive of PGR students, and recognise them as full members of staff.

End the endemic casualisation in post-16 education

Across post-16 education, job insecurity is a significant problem which has a real impact not only on employee wellbeing, but on the quality of the education experience for students. At the heart of any government reform must be a fundamental shift towards more secure employment for all staff in post-16 education.

The next UK government must take action to eradicate zero hours contracts and introduce measures to make permanent employment the norm.



Principle 4:

Fairness and inclusion should be at the heart of our education system and our society

How should we do this?

- Commit to meaningful action on equality
- Create a welcoming environment for international students and staff

Commit to meaningful action on equality and inclusion

The current UK government has used the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agenda to sow division, with those highlighting structural inequalities and calling for progressive change dismissively branded 'woke'. We have seen relentless attacks on trans rights, and an insulting lack of action in addressing the concerns of disabled people and Black communities.

The next UK government must recognise that equality is central to a fairer education system, and that ensuring every citizen has access to the educational opportunities which help meet their learning and career aspirations will benefit our economy and our society. It must also ensure that equality is central to our approaches in dealing with wider challenges facing our society – for example the rise of Artificial Intelligence or the climate emergency.

Action is also needed to improve transparency on pay and conditions, and to close pay gaps across post-16 education which remain stubbornly high. The mean gender pay gap in higher education sits at 11.9%, the disability pay gap is 10.3%.



Create a welcoming environment for international students and staff

Scotland's universities and those across the UK have always been international institutions, enhanced by the contributions of thousands of migrant staff and students. The opportunity to meet and learn from people from all over the world has made Scotland's education so valuable, but the UK government's relentless anti-immigration rhetoric and hostile environment undermines the attractiveness of our education system to international students and staff.

This has been made worse by recent rises to earnings thresholds, visa fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), as well as restrictions on students' ability to bring family members with them to the UK.

The UK government also requires complicity in its approach from educators, who must monitor visa compliance at the expense of time spent delivering a quality education.

The next UK government must:

- **remove the requirement for educators to participate in visa monitoring**
- **reduce the cost of visas and the Immigration Health Surcharge and reverse rises in minimum earnings thresholds**
- **remove restrictions on students who wish to bring family members to the UK during their studies.**

Principle 5:

Professional autonomy in the education sector must be supported and respected

How should we do this?

Ensure robust protections for academic freedom

Build a culture of staff and student engagement at all levels

Ensure robust protections for academic freedom and expand on the 2016 Higher Education Governance Act to build a culture of staff and student engagement

Academic freedom is a fundamental value of post-school education, one which provides the basis for the quality and integrity of teaching and research. Unfortunately, in recent years, the UK government has sought to use higher education to attack university workers to push a culture war it believes benefits it politically. From demanding UKRI suspend academics from advisory committees, to seeking to force universities to implement the contentious and disputed International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, the UK government has failed to respect academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

The Scottish Parliament defined and strengthened academic freedom in the 2016 Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act, but academic freedom is something that needs to be continually monitored, nurtured and defended.

Build a culture of staff and student engagement at all levels

Scotland has not been immune to the culture of marketisation that has continued to impact the UK education sector over the last decade or more.

Throughout the UK, a common thread of prioritising commercialisation and the market at the expense of staff and students is not working for anyone. It is clear to UCU, other trade unions and organisations such as the National Union of Students (NUS) that a lack of engagement with staff and students as key stakeholders can result in unworkable decisions which negatively impact the most marginalised.

By the same token, these poorly thought-out reforms create quick policy decisions within institutions that affect workloads, cause job losses, and harm the student experience, often with minimal engagement with students and staff.

The 2016 Higher Education Governance Act provided some trade union representation on governing bodies but the increasing number of disputes and continued short sighted decision making by employers shows that this reform has not been sufficient.

If we want decisions to reflect the needs of students and be deliverable and sustainable by institutions, we have to ensure that the key stakeholders have an increased voice at sector and institutional level.

Educators and the professional services staff who support the work of our education institutions are professionals who deserve autonomy and respect. It is time our system reflected that.

References

¹ <https://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Publication-Budget-Case-for-2024-FINAL.pdf>

² <https://www.stuc.org.uk/news/news/stuc-launch-tax-proposals-to-save-scotlands-public-services/>

³ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13571/Report-shows-employer-education-levy-could-replace-university-student-fees>

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/news/skills-review-published/>

