

MANIFESTO



A manifesto for the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections

University and College Union Scotland

March 2026

KEY PRIORITIES

Higher education is transformative, both for the individuals participating and for society more widely. Learning and education broaden horizons, improve wellbeing, and increase opportunities. Investing in education is also a direct investment in the economy, vital for employers and business, with universities key players and integral to local economies across Scotland.

But over a decade of underinvestment and marketisation means that universities, the staff who work in them and students are facing challenges as never before. In this briefing we set out the five key priorities for the Scottish higher education sector and the next Scottish Government.

1. Higher education must be funded fairly and sustainably
2. Enhance governance to put students and workers at the centre, ensuring democracy, transparency and accountability
3. Fair Work and decent working conditions for staff mean good outcomes for students
4. Equality and inclusion must be at the heart of our education system and our society
5. Professional autonomy and academic freedom must be respected and promoted

1. Higher education must be funded fairly and sustainably

There has never been a time in the recent history of Scottish universities where so many jobs are being lost or at risk, including by the risk of compulsory redundancy.

The reasons for the crisis are multifaceted and include bad management decisions by university principals and senior managers; changes to immigration law; external global factors; but underpinning it all is the underfunding of the sector and not fully funding the promise of free tuition for Scottish domiciled students.

The cuts have a devastating impact on the sector. As well as courses cut, jobs lost, and the impact on livelihoods, it has led to employers looking to other, riskier, sources of income, meaning that university funding has become less and less secure and at risk of market and international global and economic fluctuations. When jobs are cut, as well as the immediate impact on individuals, there is a detrimental impact on the university. Every job lost means less research conducted, courses closing, reduced contact time for students, and limited choice and options for study.

- ➔ UCU asks the next Scottish Government to fully fund Scottish higher education, and to provide emergency funding where needed to end the jobs crisis in Scottish higher education.

2. Enhance governance to put students and workers at the centre, ensuring democracy, transparency and accountability

In the current jobs crisis across Scottish universities, the unexpected deficit at Dundee university announced in autumn 2024 was the canary in the coal mine. While the deficit was a result of financial mismanagement; this was all exacerbated by poor governance and structures unable to hold an out-of-control senior management to account. Sadly, the governance at Dundee will be recognisable to UCU members in other institutions across Scotland.

UCU welcome the advances made through the 2016 Higher Education Governance Act, particularly trade union nominees being on governing bodies. However, many university employers ban the involvement of trade unions and student associations in the elections for senior lay members. It is no surprise then that turnout and engagement in elections for those roles has been low. Many trade union members of university courts report being excluded from key decision making committees; and senates have routinely been ignored by senior managers when reporting concerns over the academic standards and mission of their university.

UCU believe that the solution to the problems identified in the Gillies report into Dundee university's governance and evident across the sector, is to further reform university governance to institute democratic and participative structures that ensure the meaningful engagement of those most invested in our universities: the staff and students.

- ➔ UCU asks that the next Scottish Government takes forward measures for further reform of governance structures in universities to make them more democratic, transparent and accountable including the election of senior management positions including university principals; elected majorities on university courts; and requiring openness and an assumption of transparency for all university governing body meetings; and the introduction of recall procedures for elected positions.

3. Fair work and decent working conditions for staff mean good outcomes for students

Casualisation, that is to say insecure employment, is a defining feature of university work, with higher education the second most casualised sector in the UK. In UK universities 74% of teaching only staff and 65% of research only staff are on insecure contracts. Even these unacceptably high figures are an under-representation with large numbers of staff on bogus open-ended contracts that, in fact, include a termination date.

Not only has the number of precarious university staff increased over decades, but the time spent in precarious employment for the typical university worker has lengthened. One third of casualised staff have been in insecure employment for ten years or more. This is not a career stage: it is long term exploitation. Casualisation deepens inequality, and harms both teaching and research. Consequently, it directly harms students and their study.

UCU welcomes the announcement in January 2026 that all the fair work first criteria will apply to universities from April 2027, so that as well as effective voice (essentially recognising trade unions) and paying the living wage, university employers will need to make improvements including on workforce development; the use of zero-hour contracts; addressing workplace inequalities and providing more flexible working practices. Our experience of fair work, however, is that members can be told their employer is a “fair work employer” but that their day-to-day experience in work is very different. There is a crucial role for the Scottish Funding Council to engage with unions locally and nationally on a regular basis about the implementation, or not, of fair work in universities.

Artificial Intelligence is becoming increasingly prominent in universities but often its introduction is done in a piecemeal manner and without staff, or students, being engaged beforehand in how it impacts on their work and study. Our vision is for a future where workers are well informed about the use of, and potential advantages and disadvantages of, AI and are properly consulted in advance about its development and use in higher education. Greater attention also needs to be given to the environmental and social impacts of new technologies and less to the potential profit.

- ➔ The next Scottish Government must end the casualisation of the academic workforce, using the levers of being a major funder of universities through the Scottish Funding Council and using the Fair Work Agenda; Treat casualisation as an equalities issue; Stop hidden redundancies including the non-renewal of fixed-term contracts and atypical payments; Ban zero hour contracts and the use of open ended contracts with an end date.
- ➔ It should establish a task or working group, including trade unions and student bodies, to engage over AI in universities and ensure that there are not harmful outcomes for staff and students.

4. Equality and inclusion must be at the heart of our education system and our society

UCU believes that equality is about social justice, human rights and the type of society we want to live in. Education is a microcosm of society, with the same inequalities of class, race, gender and other social categories mirrored in university classrooms and labs.

We believe that UK immigration policy is reshaping Scottish higher education by intensifying inequality and workforce insecurity at a time of uncertainty and sector-wide redundancies. Restrictions introduced in 2023, including limits on dependents and rising visa and Immigration Health Surcharge costs, have already reduced international postgraduate enrolments and increased insecurity for migrant staff, including PhD students who work as teachers and researchers. Further restrictions proposed in the Immigration White Paper published in May 2025 risk deepening these trends through higher salary thresholds, shorter post-study visas, stricter sponsorship rules, and reduced settlement prospects. UCU is vehemently opposed to the UK Labour Government's international student fee levy on universities in England, and would not want to see it rolled out in Scotland.

Our universities hold large investments and reserves and their decision making on investment and divestment can have consequences here and around world. UCU believes that ethical investment should be central to decision making in publicly funded universities. Investment and divestment decisions must take into account environmental sustainability, social justice, labour relations, human rights and governance. UCU believes that institutions benefiting from over £1 billion pounds of public funding per year have a responsibility to ensure their financial practices do not contribute to environmental destruction, human rights abuses, or exploitative labour practices.

On the environment and net-zero, higher education is a significant user of energy in Scotland as a result of its substantial footprint and the number of staff employed and their movement, along with students, throughout the UK and internationally. As well as a contributor to climate change, the sector through research and innovation also has the potential to be part of the solution identifying breakthroughs in sustainability and technologies.

Universities also educate and develop critical thinkers and an informed electorate who can see through the populism and easy answers of the far right and climate change deniers. Education also has a key role to play in ensuring there is a Just Transition for workers in the sectors most affected by the move to net-zero.

- ➔ UCU Scotland calls on the next Scottish Government to require universities to conduct equalities data monitoring; require trade union representation on university EDI committees and; encourage the operation of anti-racist policies and plans in universities; pressurise universities to maintain and expand facilities for trans and non-binary staff and students and protect their rights; provide funding for reasonable adjustments in universities and for disability equality training.

- ➔ UCU asks the next Scottish Government to continue to oppose and not introduce any international student fee levies in Scotland; to scrutinise the impacts of UK immigration policy on Scottish higher education, including PhD students as workers; require the collection of disaggregated data on immigration status to assess to what extent redundancies, pay restraint, and precarity fall unevenly across the workforce; and ensure there are regular, people centered equality impact assessments carried out on immigration policy on devolved sectors, linked to Fair Work commitments.
- ➔ UCU asks the next Scottish Government to introduce ethical investment requirements for institutions receiving public funds; demand transparency and public reporting of investment holdings by universities; incentivise the use of impact investment; and put pressure on the UK government to reform the fiduciary duty.

5. Professional autonomy and academic freedom must be respected and promoted

There are two main aspects to academic freedom as it impacts currently in the UK, and Scotland. The first is the sense among the populist right of politics and resourced from the US that there is a 'free speech crisis'. Elsewhere in the UK this led to the creation of the Office For Students and the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) bill. While neither of these directly apply in Scotland, universities don't exist in a vacuum and their impact on debates around academic freedom carries into and impacts upon universities in Scotland.

Second is the silencing of debate on issues like gender studies and critical race theory, and recently on Palestine with examples where individual academics (including in Scotland) were publicly criticised, though later exonerated, by a then Conservative UK government minister.

These pressures in a higher education system without tenure and where over half of Scottish universities are making cuts and staff are facing redundancy, means that even if academic freedom is protected in legislation, that guarantee is less than certain when staff face being made either voluntarily or compulsorily redundant.

Academic freedom matters. The ability to pursue research and ideas, including those which are unpopular and against common orthodoxy is necessary for innovation, new thinking, and solutions.

- ➔ UCU asks the next Scottish Government to ensure employment rights and job security in universities are a priority; Where universities are implementing changes to staffing and consequently making staff redundant, ensure that employers assess the risk to and impact on academic freedom; and ensure that, as required by the 2016 legislation, academic-related and professional service staff in universities are also protected by academic freedom.

About UCU Scotland

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union in the post-16 education sector in the UK representing over 120,000 academic and related members across the UK, and is the largest union in the higher education sector in Scotland, with 9,000 members in Scottish universities.

UCU represents academic workers (including lecturers, researchers, professors, teaching fellows, graduate teaching assistants, post-graduate researchers and other “early careers” academics, etc.), as well as professional support staff, human resources staff etc.) in Scottish higher education institutions.

This briefing contains some of the key policies ideas and demands from a longer paper written by UCU Scotland’s education committee. The full paper titled “A UCU Scotland Alternative Vision for Scottish Higher Education” will be available from Spring 2026 on the UCU website: ucu.org.uk/scotland.

For more information on the policy areas in this briefing or for advice on contacting candidates in your constituency or regional list area contact [Murdo Mathison, UCU Scotland policy and communications officer](#), by email: scotland@ucu.org.uk



.....
Produced by UCU Scotland, 4th Floor, Ingram House, Glasgow G1 1DA E: scotland@ucu.org.uk W: www.ucu.org.uk/scotland
March 2026
.....