

UCU Scotland evidence to the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee on the audit of higher education in Scottish universities

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union in the post-16 education sector in the UK, representing over 110,000 academic and related members across the UK, and is the largest union in the higher education sector in Scotland. Our members in Scotland are predominantly in higher education and we have limited our comments to the 'audit of higher education in Scottish universities' and not commented on the 'Scotland's colleges 2016' report.

Introduction

UCU welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the work of the committee and their consideration of the Auditor General's audit of higher education. On the publication of the report we welcomed its publication recognising the detailed research and analysis that went into producing the report albeit that it reflects higher education before the decision for the UK to leave the European Union and the impact that this is having on the sector. The staff in Audit Scotland also, to our mind, did a commendable job in consulting with the sector in bringing the report together.

In her evidence to the public audit and post-legislative scrutiny committee, Caroline Gardner highlighted a number of issues from the report

- The concentration of resources in a small number of universities with the remaining institutions being at risk of being too reliant on SFC funding and the threat of cuts;
- Increasing difficulty of Scottish domiciled students getting places; and
- Student debt.

The report itself also highlighted some key messages, including some of those above, but also including:

- Widening access; and
- Joint working with industry and the public sector in support of national strategic objectives.

Audit of higher education

The aspect of the report which received most coverage following the publication of the report was that of funding, and particularly the sustainability of funding in the future. This was also drawn out by the auditor general when giving evidence to the committee when she commented on the different levels of funding different universities were able to draw on, and that two universities, Glasgow

and Edinburgh, hold a disproportionate share of money held in surplus in the sector.

UCU believes that, as autonomous institutions, it is right that universities are able to seek income from sources including research money, charitable donations and income generating activities in addition to government funding. In doing so it is inevitable that some universities will be more successful than others.

We do believe, however, that we should try and counter any suggestion that Scotland should aim for a policy objective of different classes of universities with some who carry out the lion's share of research and teach a small number of privileged students and others being more teaching focused, and serving much larger numbers of students. This distinction would be a model largely alien to Scotland. We know that while there is disparity between individual institutions in the amount of research that they carry out, removing the link between research and teaching would risk damaging the international reputation of Scottish higher education, and that the teaching in universities benefits from the research carried out and vice versa.

The report also highlights the risk to Scottish higher education of the threat to the HE budget being subject to Scottish Government cuts and this having a particularly marked effect on those universities most dependent on SFC funding.

Such threats around cuts are common to any sector that is within the public sector or delivers a public service, and decisions on funding are rightly made by elected politicians and the Parliament. UCU is supportive of the decision to maintain a policy of no tuition fees for Scottish and EU students, albeit that we argue fees are unfair for students regardless of where they are from, but don't accept that the trade-off for this policy, as is sometimes portrayed, is for either insufficient student support or a shortfall in the funding for our universities. If we want Scotland to be as successful a country as it can be, then higher education needs to be properly funded with staff well resourced, students properly supported and able to attend irrespective of their family income, and universities appropriately funded to carry out both world leading research and quality teaching. This should not be unachievable. UCU has for several years advocated a business education tax¹, and with the new taxation powers available to the Scottish Parliament then we hope that parties in future Scottish Parliament elections will be open to looking at whether using those powers to ensure the proper, competitive funding of Scottish higher education and supporting students is an option.

The report itself and the discussion at the committee's 6 October 2016 meeting also discussed the student support system. We have supported NUS's call for a review of the system and are pleased, as Audit Scotland acknowledged, that the Scottish Government has announced its review. Again though, it cannot be seen in the context of a choice between properly funding fees, or support, or well-funded universities themselves. Higher education in its entirety needs to be appropriately funded if it is to play its multi-faceted role of enhancing social

¹ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/BET>

mobility, driving the economy, and furthering research and knowledge alongside the other societal benefits of higher education.

With a 3% cut to the higher education budget in the current financial year, and, ahead of the imminent changes to university governance, university senior managements are continuing to push through short-sighted decisions on cutting jobs in a number of institutions, leading to real insecurity in the sector. Over the past year we have seen job losses either threatened, voluntary redundancies or compulsory redundancies at Dundee University, Abertay University, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen University, and the University of the West of Scotland. At Aberdeen, we are currently balloting members with a view to industrial action over staff at risk of redundancy in the school of medicine. Taken cumulatively, that amounts to job losses at a quarter of Scotland's higher education institutions so the issue of funding is very much to the fore of our thinking.

As in previous years, we have worked with colleagues in both Universities Scotland, sister trade unions and NUS Scotland to produce a 'common cause' statement to make the case for increased funding for higher education which should shortly be sent to MSPs.

The report makes mention of the impact of policy changes in English higher education and their impact on Scottish universities² and in particular the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) where it makes reference to the provisions of the UK Government Higher Education and Research Bill currently being scrutinised by the UK parliament. We have separately set out for the Education and Skills committee as part of their scrutiny of the legislative consent motion for the bill our opposition to the proposal to allow Scottish universities to opt in voluntarily to the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) because we believe that the existing Scottish framework works well and that if, even on a voluntary basis, some Scottish universities opt into the TEF then there will be irresistible pressure for other institutions to do the same, with the result that Scottish higher education will be a further step along the road to marketisation, without proper scrutiny in the Scottish Parliament and which we do not believe the majority of MSPs would support.

The report also identified that there is scope for increasing opportunities for universities, and partner organisations including the Scottish Government to work together to drive forward an economic strategy for the country. This is clearly important work, and the recent 'Enterprise and Skills' review's findings for the Scottish Funding Council will play a part in ensuring the higher education and industry continue to work together. As an academic and related trade union, UCU believes that, as well as having a crucial role in driving innovation and the economy, universities also have an, at least, equally important function in that the staff who teach and carry out research in universities make significant intellectual contributions in advancing scholarship and the sharing of knowledge that should be similarly valued.

² Audit Scotland, Audit of higher education in Scottish universities, part 5, paragraph 120.

Brexit

It is also worth noting that in some ways the timing of the report is unfortunate. The impact on higher education in Scotland and across the UK from the UK leaving the European Union are enormous and will impact on the EU staff who work in our universities, impact on research funding, and impact on EU students now and in the future. We warmly welcomed the announcement when it was made by the Scottish Government to fully fund for the entirety of their courses EU nationals applying to study in Scottish universities starting in both 2016/17 and 17/18.

If you were, post 23 June 2016, to start afresh and write a report on Scottish higher education identifying the threats to our universities you would probably begin with a significant section on the UK leaving the European Union and the dangers therein. That this isn't included is unfortunate but not something that Audit Scotland could reasonably have been expected to foresee or include given the, generally accepted, surprise result of the referendum.

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