I welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Education and Culture Committee on the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill. I feel that as a sector focused on student engagement and participation in the provision of Higher Education (HE), students’ views should be an integral part of decisions at all levels of HE policy. I am encouraged by the open consultation and active student involvement of the Scottish Government in this legislative process and hope that through this we can ensure that Scotland remains at the fore of delivering a world class HE provision.

As Vice President Education & Engagement at the University of Stirling Students’ Union I represent a large and diverse cohort of students from various backgrounds and have drawn on my knowledge and experiences in composing the evidence presented in this paper.

**Higher Education Institutions: Good Governance**

I welcome the recommendations of the Prondzynski review of HE Governance and believe that it is only right that as publicly funded enterprises Higher Education Institutions (HEI) abide by a code of good practice. Through the introduction of a code we would not only assure the quality of HE governance processes, but also bring the sector in line with other publicly funded bodies such as the Scottish Social Services Council.

The recommendations of the Prondzynski review provide increased levels of transparency to institutions and the sector as well as enshrining student involvement in the selection of institutional senior leaders by putting students at the centre of institutional strategy.

**Widening Access to Higher Education**

I support the creation of outcome agreements and welcome moves to make fairer access a condition of grant for HEIs. However, the process for developing outcome agreements did not adequately involve students and has led to outcome agreements with little to no student input. This has resulted in agreements which do not reflect the aspirations of all institutional stakeholders and have resulted in unambitious targets for forthcoming academic sessions. I feel that as part of the Scottish Funding Council’s (SFC) review of outcome agreements there could be a greater role for them in ensuring oversight, and that Universities are being sufficiently ambitious.

As much as HEIs must improve upon the recruitment of SMD20 and SMD40, they must also ensure that appropriate support is in place in order to retain these students and
allow them to excel. Although I support the idea of financial penalties against those HEIs who do not meet their targets, I do believe that they should only be used as a last resort. The introduction of financial incentives for those institutions who not only meet recruitment targets but also manage to retain students from SMD20/SMD40 backgrounds through to graduation or completion of an academic award may be more favourable.

**Fee Cap: Students Liable for Higher Education Fees**

I supported the creation of a fee cap for Rest of the UK (RUK) students and feel that although the issue for equity of costs to RUK students has resulted from the Westminster Governments decision to increase fees to £9,000 the Scottish Government should seek to mitigate any negative consequences to RUK students studying in Scotland. I would therefore support a fee cap equal to the average cost of a three year degree south of the border. This would reduce the marketization of the sector and allow students to choose an institution which is best suited to their skills and aspirations as opposed to their financial situation.

Further consideration should also be given on the costs of academic awards as there could be situations where the cost of a general degree in Scotland is more than the average cost of a general degree in England. If there is a worry that people are picking courses and institutions due to the cost then maybe we need to have a standard cost of a degree (for Rest of the UK students) across Scotland based on success. For instance, if a student leaves with a Bachelor they pay X, if they leave with a Bachelor with Honours then they pay Y, and so on as appropriate.

**Review of Higher Education**

It is appropriate that as with SFC’s review of good governance they should review the provision of HE more widely. At the core of any review we should ensure that education remains open and free to all, meets the needs of students (including future students) and is a protected part of our society. HE provision should ensure local access to a variety of HE courses and the review should not use duplication of provision as a tool to create specialist subject institutions or force institutions to close courses. The links between research and teaching should also be strengthened within the sector, to ensure that HEIs do not focus solely on high intensive research departments. Universities are not about research but sharing knowledge.