Thank you for the invitation to submit written evidence in advance of my appearance before the Education and Culture Committee.

The University of Strathclyde’s primary concern is to ensure that Scotland’s global reputation for high-quality higher education is preserved and enhanced. It welcomes the shared commitment to this objective by members of all political parties. Strathclyde believes that it is in Scotland’s best interest for the Parliament and the Higher Education sector to work together in partnership. It is in that context that I welcome the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee.

In considering the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill, I believe the Parliament should ensure that measures are proportionate. The University accepts the need for the sector to demonstrate that public investment in higher education results in positive outcomes for students, the broad economy and wider society. It believes that the necessary checks and balances are provided by the existing regulatory framework. The Scottish Funding Council’s existing powers – delivered through the Letter of Grant, Financial Memorandum and recently introduced Outcome Agreement process – are extensive, and provide the necessary public assurance that the sector is delivering.

This country has successfully been able to balance a strong regulatory framework with the underlying principle of institutional autonomy. This has allowed the development of distinctive institutions capable of competing with the best in the world. Nowhere in the UK can this be seen better than in Scotland, which punches well above its weight, with tangible benefits for Scotland. Parliament should ensure the principle of autonomy is protected in this Bill. It is critical in allowing institutions the flexibility they need to compete on a global platform and to generate the type of research and knowledge exchange which will grow the economy, increase employment and generate wealth.

Strathclyde has demonstrated that it is possible to pursue a distinctive mission while meeting its obligations to society. It is the leading research intensive university in Scotland for the admission of students from the most deprived areas in Scotland (as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation).

As a direct consequence of the current level of institutional autonomy in Scotland, the University has also and has been able to secure a series of notable investments which will make a direct positive social and economic impact in areas such as energy, climate change, health and technology. The University’s priorities align well with those of successive Governments.
Freedom to determine our approach has allowed us to be innovative. Initiatives in the course of the past year include:

- Agreeing to binding and specific targets to increase participation by groups underrepresented in the sector as part of the Outcome Agreement negotiation process.
- Securing the UK’s first Fraunhofer Centre, bringing Europe’s largest organisation for applied research to Glasgow, and creating the new Fraunhofer Centre for Applied Photonics. The Centre, based at the University will be a hub for industry-driven laser research and technology for a variety of sectors including healthcare, security, energy and transport.
- Securing two Technology Strategy Board “Catapult Centres” for Offshore Renewable Energy and High Value Manufacturing with a strong prospect of winning a third Centre imminently.
- Working with industry, and responding to sector demand for skills, by developing an Engineering Academy – in partnership with the FE sector – and a new undergraduate degree in Biomedical Engineering.
- Supporting sustainable economic growth by developing a distinct approach to industrial collaboration – partners include Boeing, Rolls-Royce, GSK, Aggreko, Babcock, Jaguar and the Weir Group.
- Taking a ‘whole lifetime’ approach to widening access, in partnership with our Students’ Association, through working with the Children’s University and the Age-Friendly University Initiative.

In awarding Strathclyde the title UK University of the Year, the judges said: “Its focus on ‘useful learning’ and on really meaningful work with industry had come together in an impressive way.” They said: “Strathclyde stood out as an institution that had an extraordinary understanding of where it was, where it wanted to be and how it was going to get there.”

Our strategy and innovative approach is due to the fleetness of foot and flexibility of approach which the principle of ‘responsible autonomy’ and appropriate accountability – already in place provides. I do not believe Parliament needs to legislate in these areas.

The Bill should reinforce the principle of responsible autonomy which has served us so well in Scotland, and Parliament should be wary of the unintended consequences of changes which might, at some point in the future, be used to undermine this principle, and in doing so undermine Scotland’s ability to compete in an increasingly competitive global higher education environment.

Professor Sir Jim McDonald
Principal and Vice-Chancellor