Dear Sirs and Madames

I am writing in relation to the higher education governance bill and the changes that this will bring to the leadership and management of our nation’s universities.

My reading of the proposals is that all of Scotland’s universities are to now be subject to a standardised set of regulations on the appointments of governing bodies and councils and for the selection of university leadership positions.

I strongly believe that to maintain our country’s higher education sector at the highest levels that we need to always be looking for reform and innovations not just in the content of courses and the range of subjects covered but also in the leadership and management of these institutions. The various universities in Scotland employ a range of management structures that provide potential for development and evolution to best fit their requirements. With arrangements in each institution differing dependant on their size and composition. Best practice can then be migrated to other institutions either in whole or in the parts where they are most successful.

To my mind a government bill standardising university governance will remove any room for innovation in this area as all will have to directly conform to a set profile. Therefore improving governing structures in the future will have to be done centrally and universally. Would there be room for the University of the West of Scotland to change their governing council to respond to changing requirements without the agreement of the government at the time? What if the challenges one university faced differed from those of another? Is one size fits all the answer?

A second strong concern is over the use of enabling legislation. Does this mean that whilst at an initial stage the changes might be limited whilst subject to select committee scrutiny and a public reading. But if the legislation allows for future changes to be made by the government without a further consultation. Are we not opening the door to a whole range of leadership changes? The appointment of University chancellors by government? This feels very much like the thin end of the wedge of a move to make university leadership become political appointments.
Finally on the current reading the governing councils will have a core group of representatives from the staff, union, student and alumni. I strongly believe in the benefits of dynamic unionism but question if this allocation is correct. The proposal is for 2 union representatives and two staff representatives. I presume these are drawn from the same body of workers? What if union membership is low at a particular institution? If the staff representatives are elected are the union representatives, or are they appointed centrally?

I hope these questions are of use in your considerations

David Watt