Submission from Frank Quinault

Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill

Response to the Consultation

I write as a retired member of staff of the University of St Andrews, where I held various senior appointments, including that of Assistant Principal for External Affairs, during my 35 years of service. I also had a long and close association with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, which included membership of its Academic Board. I have acted as an external reviewer of numerous universities and other HE institutions in Scotland, England and South Africa, and I continue to serve as a member of the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education.

Throughout my long involvement with higher education, in all institutions and indeed all countries of which I have personal knowledge, institutional autonomy has been a fundamental principle. Governments must, of course, ensure that the HE institutions which they help to fund, and which are so important to the economic as well as the cultural health of a nation, are properly regulated. In Scotland this has been achieved in the best possible way, by allowing each HEI the freedom to create a system of governance that is aligned with its particular mission and individual circumstances, rather than having to conform to a prescribed and uniform template. I cannot prove that this has been crucial for the past and present success of Scotland’s universities, but I firmly believe it to be so. Outside intervention in their governance should only ever be justified by clear evidence that something serious is amiss.

Neither the Bill itself nor the Explanatory Notes provide any such evidence. Moreover, Scottish HEIs are already reviewing their own governance arrangements in accordance with the admirable Scottish Code of Good HE Governance, which incorporates a ‘comply or explain’ principle. I see no need whatsoever for a new Bill at this juncture.

The proposed Bill is not just unnecessary: it is potentially harmful, because it includes provisions that could undermine institutional autonomy. The areas of concern have been set out with great clarity by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, in its response to the Consultation, and with all the authority of that august academic body. I endorse all that they have said and conclude, with them, that the proposed Bill should be withdrawn.

Frank Quinault,