I should be obliged if you would bring this letter to the attention of the committee.

I am deeply concerned at the Scottish Government’s proposals to interfere in the governance of Scotland’s universities.

My concerns are the following

1. The Committee of Scottish Chairs has already instigated the Scottish Code of HE Governance, which is currently going well and is due for a formal review in 2016. Surely, the time to consider changes is after that review? Why do you want two sets of changes going on at the same time?

2. A simple worry that governmental power over the governing bodies in universities will be deleterious to their ability to provide unbiased research and opinion. While I can understand that the government wants value for money, the way to ensure this is to look at the results, not to interfere in the manner in which these results are obtained.

3. Legislating on the size and composition of the various university bodies may possibly be acceptable, but prescribing that some members must be appointed by the unions – and therefore not by the body of staff as a whole – is biased and unfair to the people concerned. All members need to be totally independent in their considerations and not hampered by worries of what their union’s opinion would be. The appointment of members is already open, unbiased and wide; I do not understand why you are meddling in something which works so well.

4. The fact that this is being done through enabling legislation is absolutely disgraceful. Any later government can then apply politically biased decisions without a full debate – and without the vast majority of the electorate being aware of what is happening – and to the huge detriment of the universities.

5. As well as training the next generation of graduates, the universities are the source of a great deal of important and useful research, some of it of a politically sensitive nature. It is essential for the political health of this country that their academic freedom and diversity of views is actively nurtured. At the very least, I should like to see a clear statement to this effect at the heart of this new legislation. Then, when a later government does apply political pressure on the universities, there may be a chance of fighting back.

6. You should bear in mind that these universities are the jewel in the crown of Scottish education, and the key to our future independence and prosperity. Any changes you make should be very carefully thought through, well discussed, well understood and agreed by the universities themselves – who are the ones who best know how they operate and what the impacts will be on
their systems. This is not just some other part of the economy which can be changed one way and then changed back again in a couple of years. Our best universities are significant international players, but lasting damage is lasting damage.

7. Finally, I am outraged at the plan effectively to get rid of the post of Rector. As a graduate of St Andrews University, I have seen the enormous impact a good Rector can have, the very real feeling of being empowered in the university which he or she can bring. The students want a real representative, not a figurehead, a puppet.

Grace Lyon
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