Dear Sir/Madam,

I write to submit my opinions regarding the Higher Education Governance Bill.

Given the long-standing and well-documented problems the Scottish Government faces with deteriorating standards in primary and secondary education I have difficulty in grasping why the valuable time of Parliamentarians and their officials is being taken up with something where no significant problems appear to exist.

Any perceived concerns seem to be well covered by the Scottish Code of Higher Education Governance. Should there be any issues arising from experience of the application of the Code then these can be addressed through the review in 2016. It is wrong to seek to legislate while this programme is still running.

That said, I have two concerns about an important matter of principle: I believe that the Bill threatens the independence and individuality that are the reasons why our top universities are among the best in the world.

First, following the Bill's consultation stage, the commitment to maintain the autonomy of HE institutions and to respect their diversity and ethos was dropped in favour of standardisation. This 'sameness' will undermine the creativity and excellence that characterise our universities. The Bill will lead to a deterioration in teaching and research standards, and in the universities' contribution to the country's economy.

My second concern is the further threat to the autonomy and independence of our HE institutions that will arise from allowing Ministerial powers without adequate checks and balances.

The Bill makes detailed proposals about such things as the appointment of Chairs and the membership of Courts and Senates, yet proposes to give Ministers powers to issue subsequent regulations on these matters without the safeguard of scrutiny in parliament. This undermines confidence in the openness and integrity of the initial proposals and can only be interpreted as a device to enable ministerial control over how universities function. This does not sit well with other - worthy - expressions in the Bill of a desire to increase levels of academic freedom. These freedoms are indeed vital to ensure that universities can remain centres of independent thinking and opinion.

As I said at the start of this letter, I want our parliamentary representatives to spend their time tackling the real and urgent problems we see in the performance of our primary and secondary education sectors. Given these issues the Higher Education Governance Bill is irrelevant and unnecessary and should be dropped, allowing existing governance arrangements to take their course.

Yours sincerely,

Hamish Johnston