I have been a higher education journalist for over 30 years (I was Scottish editor of The Times Higher Education until 2009) and I have also just demitted office as a court member of Queen Margaret University after six years.

Since the universities were devolved in 1992, a key principle of academic freedom has been that Government should be at arm's-length from running them, with the Scottish Funding Council acting as a buffer body. It is deeply concerning that this Bill would increase Government control, endangering that academic freedom which enables them to operate without fear of political interference.

I am particularly dismayed by the Bill's proposals on the composition of governing bodies. I have lengthy experience of higher education institutions' governance, including practical experience at QMU, and can see absolutely no need for this. Nor has the Government provided any rationale for its proposals. This strikes me as a classic example of "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." The strength of our HE system is its diversity, and the proposals undermine that. The HEIs themselves have already adopted a Scottish Code of Good HE Governance: their public funding is dependent on compliance with this code, but unlike the Bill, it does not destabilise the distinctiveness of different institutional issues. This legislation is unnecessary. The institutions themselves are pushing not just to maintain standards but to raise them, and the code ensures that what they do is accountable, transparent and inclusive.

The proposal for trade union nominees is misconceived. Governing bodies already include elected trade union members but, like all members of the governing bodies, they serve as individuals, not as representatives. I write as a trade union member: I have been a member of the National Union of Journalists throughout my career and believe firmly in unions' importance. But in terms of serving on governing bodies, we leave any vested interests at the door and join together as a group of "critical friends" all working to do our best for the institution.

My experience of QMU is also of a proactive commitment to diversity, including gender balance. I served on both the nominations committee and equality and diversity committee for several years. The nominations committee is responsible for interviewing and
recommending court members, taking account of the balance of skills and attributes that are needed, and when seeking out new court members, the university is explicit about its commitment to diversity.

I would urge the Committee to ensure that these damaging proposals are not implemented.

Olga Wojtas