Submission from Queen Margaret University branch of University and College Union

At a quorate members meeting of Queen Margaret University branch of University and College Union on 2nd September, I, as branch president, was unanimously requested to write on behalf of members in support of UCU Scotland’s response to the consultation on the Higher Education Governance Bill.

In particular we would like to draw attention to the following.

There is clearly a problem with governance in Higher Education in Scotland. QMU is by no means the worst offender, but still staff have no direct means to influence governance in the institution. As representatives of the staff for the purposes of terms and conditions and policies, the unions have no access to senior decision making. The current governance model gives too much power to senior management, who are then in a position to brief the members of Court, with almost no accountability and no opportunity to be questioned by an independent representative of the staff. This leads to an unhealthy managerial approach within the institution, in which decisions are taken by senior managers and then passed down the hierarchy to staff with minimal opportunity for challenge. This is leading to depersonalisation of staff and opportunities for managers to abuse their power. It is important to open up decision making to public scrutiny and to allow for the professionalism and autonomy of collegial decision making amongst staff. A more open governance model would not damage university autonomy, but would rather give that autonomy to those professionals who deliver the education, research and scholarship, rather than as currently, the senior managers to treat universities as businesses, free of accountability to the constituencies which the institution should be serving.

QMU is currently seeking to appoint a new chair of Court, which highlights the lack of transparency, and veneer of openness which masks decision making by a small, unaccountable group of managers. Staff have been ‘invited’ to make suggestions for the next Chair of Court, but the selection and appointment is made by a closed group of managers using unknown criteria, who are unaccountable for their decision. Having a chair elected by staff and students, and having Court members representing the community in which the university is situated (especially those who tend to be excluded from participation in the benefits of university scholarship) would make Court more accountable.

As the only independent and democratic bodies representing staff at the institution, trades unions should play an important role in making governance more open and accountable. There should therefore be trade union nominees on Court. Trade union representatives currently have no guaranteed access to Court (unlike senior managers). The staff of a university constitute it’s principal asset, and so the opportunity for staff to elect onto Court representatives who would best represent their interests, via independent trade union structures, would be in the best interests of the university as a whole, and therefore would not breach Nolan principles.

We note that the von Prondzynski commission represented all the major university stakeholders – rectors, chairs of court, principals, staff unions and students unions –
and produced a reasoned set of proposals to reform higher education governance. We believe that the Higher Education Bill should endorse all of these recommendations. Already the chairs of Court have ensured that the Code of Governance which was approved last year was watered down from the proposals of the von Prondzynski report. It is important that Parliament does not allow Universities Scotland to dilute the current Bill and seeks to implement higher education governance of the highest standards of openness, transparency and accountability.

Yours sincerely

Eurig Scandrett
UCU QMU branch president