Scotland has long been looked up to for the high standard of education it has provided, especially in its universities, and my wife and I, our two daughters and son-in-law have benefitted immensely by being alumni of five of them. The proposed Higher Education Bill seems determined to remove that pre-eminence apparently for no other reason than a wish to have an overbearing control over them as would be expected in a totalitarian state.

A universal governance document has never been suitable or workable for diverse institutions. It stultifies their individuality and reduces them to the lowest common denominator. In Scotland, universities such as St. Andrews and Strathclyde are very different and each is excellent in different ways. Why, then, should the Scottish Parliament wish to make them the same? The assertion that “our aim is not to increase Ministerial control over institutions, but to support our institutions to develop their own governance systems to enable them to continue to reach their full potential” is hypercritical nonsense in the context of the whole bill.

All the right words have been used such as transparency, accountability and inclusivity, but the Bill effectively makes the Scottish Parliament and its agents the managers of the universities especially in the appointment of Professors, the membership of the University Court and the composition of academic boards and will seriously diminish the ability of each university to pursue its own excellencies and long established concerns. Heriot Watt, for example, was in the vanguard of establishing a Chair of Actuarial Science, Strathclyde has an excellent Business School, Aberdeen has excelled in Forestry. There will be little, if any, support for such individual and important pursuits.

The attack on the role of Rector and that of the University Court seems to be a gratuitous act of destruction. The office of Rector is of long standing and works well and is enormously valued by students. The Chancellor’s Assessor’s role in chairing the University Court is an important link between Chancellor, staff, members of the Court and students. To remove the ancient title of Principal of the University and replace it with the weasel words “Chief Executive” is an unnecessary nonsense. So, why remove them? One is to tempted to say that it stems from spiteful interference.

The University of St. Andrews of which I am a graduate delivers excellent value for money, 12:1, and many other institutions to be affected by the Bill will have a similar record. Those who do not should be tackled individually. There is no reason to attack them all with the same fly swat.

As it stands, the legislation is clumsy and probably unworkable. If it is passed, the high reputation of Scotland’s universities will have been dealt a mortal blow, self-inflicted by the legislative body which claims to stand for all that is good in Scotland.

Shame on the Scottish Government if this Bill is passed, and it will be a shame which can never be redeemed or reversed. Do not make this Bill law as it stands. It will be a matter of everlasting regret.

Michael MacLeod Edge