Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill: Submission from the Steve Morrison, Rector of University of Edinburgh

I am the current Rector of Edinburgh University. I was elected in February 2015 for a three-year term. I understand that the currently elected Rectors of the Ancient Scottish Universities will not be affected by the proposed legislation and we will serve out our terms. I therefore have no personal vested interest in the effect of the legislation. However the Bill as currently written poses a threat to the future of what I consider to be a historic part of Scottish Higher Education and I would like to address my evidence to ensuring the continuation of the position of elected Rectors in the Ancient Scottish Universities chairing University Courts.

As Rector of Edinburgh University I have been involved in the document which has been submitted as “Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill: Submission from the University of Edinburgh” from Edinburgh University.

I agree with the evidence in that document that the current system works and the University takes very seriously its obligation to provide robust corporate governance and accountability. However I would like to go further with respect to the question asked in Question 4 of the invitation to submit evidence, “Question 4 – Please provide your views on the merits of each of the specific proposals on appointment of chair; inclusion of various persons within the membership of governing bodies; and requirements that academic boards should be comprised of no more than 120 people and include various persons.”

I agree with the proposal that Chairs of governing bodies in Scottish Higher Education institutions should be publically
elected. I further think that the Edinburgh University model is a particularly good one because all members of staff, academic and non academic, and all students are entitled to vote. The whole procedure is therefore inclusive and every member of the University can participate in the election of the Chair of its governing body.

In the case of Edinburgh University and the other Ancient Scottish Universities, that person is accorded the long standing historic title of Rector and he or she chairs the University Court. I think it would be unfortunate and a mistake to lose that part of the Scottish Ancient Universities’ heritage by substituting a more modern title. It should be up to any Scottish Higher Institution to entitle their Chair in any way they wish.

The question then arises as to how the candidates who compete in the public election should be nominated. I don’t agree with the current selection method as described in the Bill and would need further practical discussion about how candidates should be entered so that the process of nomination and election is genuinely democratic.

I believe that alumni of Universities will become more important as external mentors for current students and therefore I would not agree to reduce their number on the University Court. I agree with the proposal that trade union members should be elected to the governing body and would also suggest that local city and community members should be sought from a wider range of candidates including community councils so that they have a closer engagement with their local University.

Regarding the Senate, I would submit that one size does not fit all. Edinburgh University has 12,000 staff and so a
proportionate size for its senate should be found conducive to
democratic participation rather than picking an arbitrary limit
of 120 members. As I have been elected by the staff as well as
the students, I intend to consult the staff on this issue.

In order to further exchange views with the Parliamentary
Committee I would like to appear in person before the
Committee and give oral evidence.