Dear Keir and colleagues

I have been approached by Sheila Williams, one of the elected staff members of Court, concerning the written response by QMU’s UCU branch to the consultation on the Government’s Higher Education Governance Bill. Sheila and I had a very helpful discussion and I have decided to write to you to clarify any potential misunderstanding.

I believe it is important to recognise the purpose of the written response, which is part of a consultation on the Higher Education Governance (HEG) Bill. This Government Bill is designed “to strengthen governance in the higher education sector in Scotland” and to ensure that legislation supports the Scottish Government’s desire for “modern, democratic and accountable processes to inform governance arrangements in higher education institutions”. The need for legislative change was identified through a series of processes set up by the Scottish Government, and in particular the 2012 Review of Higher Education Governance in Scotland, undertaken by a Commission chaired by Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, on which there was representation from all sectors of higher education.

The principal purpose of UCU’s consultation response was to support the Scottish Government’s proposal to reform higher education governance and to improve the balance between autonomy, accountability and good governance. In particular, UCU believes that it is in the best interests of staff, students, the university as a whole and indeed the wider society, to have universities that are more accountable to the communities that they serve, and in particular that the Chair of Court should be elected by staff and students of the university, and that there should be trade union representation on Court, both aspects of the HEG Bill.

In my response to the consultation, I referred to the current process of selection of Chair of Court at QMU. I should make it clear that this is not a criticism of the integrity of the individuals involved in the process of selection. I have no reason to suspect that anybody involved with this selection process is acting with anything other than the best of motives to make the current structure work in the best interests of the university. However, the point is, they are only able to work within the current structure, whereas the purpose of the HEG Bill is to reform that structure. I know that the vacancy for Chair of Court has been widely advertised and I have been made aware that elected staff members and student union representatives have been fully involved in the process of selection of UCU’s Chair of Court. It is, however, a process of selection, within parameters set by a management structure. I have no reason to believe that those who participate in the process do not adhere to high principles in their selection criteria, or
that candidates are rigorously assessed against professional standards. However, this is very different from an open and democratic process of election with subsequent accountability of the successful candidate to those who elected them.

I personally believe that QMU’s Court conducts its affairs in good faith and in many ways with exemplary integrity. I would have my criticisms, as would other staff, but that is not the purpose of the consultation response. QMU acts within the constraints set by legal structure. As a representative of staff it is my responsibility to reflect the position that these legal structures would be improved by the reforms proposed by the current HEG Bill.

In my response I also draw attention to what UCU members believe is one of the impacts of an inadequate level of openness and accountability in governance: unhealthy managerialism throughout the university, inadequate opportunity for independent challenge to decision-making, deprofessionalisation of staff and the erosion of opportunities for collegial decision making. These concerns have been brought to the attention of senior managers by trade unions through the appropriate channels available and are currently subject to negotiation. However it is our belief that a greater requirement for openness and accountability of university governance as a whole would reduce the risk of these problems arising.

UCU is of course the largest trade union representing academic and related staff in higher education in Scotland and indeed at QMU. I have been elected by and am accountable to members through an open democratic process, to represent the independent and collective interests of staff, based on experience and articulated through democratic structures. The way in which these views have been expressed in the consultation response is my own. If the tone of my consultation response gave the impression of a public criticism of QMU and individual Court members then I apologise. I remain accountable for my actions to UCU members.

Yours sincerely

Eurig Scandrett
QMUUCU Branch President