

## Submission 11, dated 25 March 2022

I am writing to all members of the ECYP regarding the current disputes in Higher Education.

The first dispute revolves around working conditions. New retail price index inflation figures of 7.8% mean that UCU staff wages are now down by over 25% in real terms since 2009; over 70,000 academics are employed on insecure contracts (including a whopping 42% of teaching staff at University of Edinburgh); the gender pay gap in universities sits at 16%, whilst the disability pay gap is 9% and the race pay gap is up to 17%; we have more students to take care of and less time to do so. Meanwhile, university finance figures show that total income across the sector is around £41.9bn with reserves of £46.8bn, mostly due to skyrocketing tuition income. And yet, in my view, teaching and learning conditions are being swept aside in an attempt to Hoover up more cash.

The second dispute is due to, what I believe to be, an attack on members of the private USS fund; my own pension is being cut by a staggering 43%. Two points are important regarding this wage theft. First, these are deferred wages which my employer is simply taking away, to the benefit of its £113mn surplus (or rather, profit). In October 2021, one of our Vice-Principals told senior management of the "larger than expected fiscal surplus" because "we thought we would have to contribute a lot more money to the USS pension scheme ... which is, of course, fantastic news". Meanwhile, the Principal brazenly asserted that UCU's proposal was "unaffordable". And second, the issue is due to a dysfunction in governance that has been thoroughly documented by UCU experts. The employers and USS are bending if not breaking the rules, to the fiscal advantage of institutions rather than for the benefit of its members in retirement.

In my view, a full Committee inquiry is now necessary in light of what appear to be repeated false claims made by university Principals and Vice-Principals (all documented thoroughly by UCU experts). Clearly this Committee cannot resolve the UK-wide dispute itself. Nevertheless, an inquiry is in our common interest to better understand decisions being taken in Scotland, regarding the governance of Scotland's universities, and determining the unjustified fate of the education given to students in Scotland.

Concretely, I ask that the Committee call senior university management to provide public accounts of their position. Such a move would bring much needed scrutiny to the crisis and help to illuminate the situation, so that a negotiated and evidence-based outcome can be achieved (something employers are currently resolutely against). A lack of public accountability and oversight has led us to a situation where the foundations of the sector are at risk, undermining the future of both students and staff. The Committee, however, would examine the specific actions of Scottish universities that have prolonged the dispute and call on NUS Scotland to give their view. I believe that it should question University Principals in Scotland on what they are doing to resolve the dispute and to address the conditions that led to it. Students are clearly not enjoying the best possible experience in higher education, as they themselves would tell you once you summon them, nor is this possible while industrial action - but more importantly the conditions that led to it - continue.

To be clear, students are firmly behind us. Our campaign has the support of the National Union of Students Scotland and of NUS UK; indeed, one saving grace has been the support and camaraderie shown by our students. Accordingly, I am writing to the Committee (as well as to my MSPs and Minister Hepburn). For two years now, it has been my hope that employers would see reason and return to the negotiating table; there are so many people worse off than me, within and outwith Scotland, that I was hesitant to contact

my elected representatives directly. But my sector is now at a turning point, with other sectors to follow if we fail. I'm incredibly fortunate to work doing what I love, with students who inspire me and colleagues I admire. By all accounts, we should be in a position to create a world-class educational experience, but instead we're being worn out by forces who see my calling as an opportunity to extract profit. The help of you and your peers is essential.

### **Addendum to submission, September 2022**

The recent six months have done little to assuage the concerns expressed in my original letter. As students have finally been returning to campuses in person, eager for interaction with their enthusiastic lecturers and support staff, university staff continue to be treated as expendable resources. Two specific points deserve mention in this context; UCU Scotland is submitting an updated briefing as well. First, the rising cost of living only cements further the need for pay to properly compensate staff. And second, the pensions debacle has now escalated into a veritable fiasco. In my view, USS itself has all but confirmed that UCU's warnings about the cuts were correct: there was no need to conduct an evaluation mid-pandemic.

Shockingly, in my view, our employers do not want to conduct a corrective evaluation now, citing market volatility. I would very much like to see my Vice-Chancellor perspire in front of the Committee as he is questioned regarding what I regard as his duplicity. Scottish staff and students deserve far better than this.