

UCU MSP Briefing

The crisis in Scottish Universities

Industrial action is currently taking place at 11 universities across Scotland, in disputes over pensions, pay and working conditions. Most university branches of the University and College Union (UCU) are due to strike for a further 5 days this month, on top of 10 days taken so far this year. It is not an exaggeration to say that, with 6000 members of university staff on strike, there is currently a crisis in Scottish Universities.

An entire cohort of students at Scottish Universities – those who started their degrees in 2018 – have had their education disrupted by the industrial dispute on top of the difficulties of the pandemic.

The dispute reflects a series of challenges that have resulted in historically low staff morale:

- Staff pay has fallen by 20% in real-terms across the sector over the past twelve years.
- Devastating cuts to USS pensions, amounting to 35% to guaranteed retirement benefits for those on the starting salary for lecturers.
- Over two thirds of staff in Scotland have [reported increased workload](#) since 2020.
- One third of academic staff are on fixed term contracts across the UK, with over 66,000 on the most precarious “atypical” contracts, many of which lack basic workplace rights.
- Gender, BAME, and disability pay gaps stand at 15.5%, 17%, and 9% respectively. Surveys show [over half of higher education staff are showing signs of depression](#).

These conditions inevitably have an effect on the experience of the 50,000 students who study in Scotland each year in Scottish higher education. A sector built on the rampant use of insecure contracts, serious equality failings, staff burnout and falling pay cannot consistently deliver the best for students. Students recognise that [their learning conditions and staff working conditions are inexorably linked](#). The National Union of Students (NUS) has [backed staff taking industrial action](#).

Scotland’s internationally renowned higher education sector is a key pillar of the economic and intellectual development of the nation. Its reputation is under threat.

At the University of Edinburgh, for example, one of the wealthiest non-state organizations in Scotland:

- income from tuition fees has tripled since 2009.
- 42% of teaching is now being undertaken by people on insecure contracts.

- staff wages have been allowed to fall by 25% in real terms.
- a surplus of £113million was recorded last year.

In October 2021 Gavin McLachlan, Vice-Principal told a senior management meeting 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”. Yet, in an email to staff of 10 February 2022, Principal Peter Mathieson insisted that the University and College Union (UCU)’s compromise proposals are ‘unaffordable’. Logically, only one or other of these positions can be true; we think this variance raises important questions.

Members of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (“USS”) are having their pensions slashed, in some cases by up to 42%. Higher contributions from USS fund members are being forced through using a snapshot valuation as the pandemic hit markets showing an apparent deficit, a deficit which has evaporated. Although the use of this low valuation is currently being challenged in court, it raises the wider dysfunction in governance that affects all of Scotland’s universities: namely, that the USS fund is being managed by University leaders to the fiscal advantage of institutions rather than for the benefit of its members in retirement. The functioning of Joint Negotiating Committee, consisting of representatives of the UCU and employers, has effectively broken down, to the perpetual advantage of employers.

The Principals of Scotland’s Universities could and should be using their leadership position to ensure that staff are valued and fairly rewarded; that students receive an excellent education; and that the international standing of Scottish universities is maintained. Instead, they have remained largely silent. The UCU presented [compromise proposals](#) for the USS Pension Dispute, which universities, including those in Scotland, rejected, without explanation or justification. Universities in Scotland are legally bound to carry out Equality Impact Assessments on all policies, but despite the fact that the pension cuts risk exacerbating gender, race and class inequalities, university leaders in Scotland have not revealed if they have carried out any such assessments.

Resolution of the industrial dispute is beyond the scope of the Committee; it is UK-wide and between the UCU and the employers’ associations, Universities UK (UUK) and the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA). The Committee could, however, examine the specific actions of Scottish universities that have prolonged the dispute. It could question University Principals in Scotland on what they are doing to resolve the dispute and to address the conditions that led to it. The Committee strives to “achieve the best possible experiences and outcomes for children, young people, lifelong learners and service deliverers.” Student learners are clearly not enjoying the best possible experience in higher education, nor is this possible while the strikes, and the conditions that led to them, continue. Greater public scrutiny can help understand the underlying causes of this dispute with a view to a securing the resolution that staff and students urgently need.

The Scottish Government are a major stakeholder in the nation’s universities. With a consistent and welcome commitment to free higher education for Scottish students, the Scottish Government underwrite fees across the country, whilst reinforcing the virtue of equality of access to higher education as a principle. In the case of the University of Edinburgh, financial support extends beyond the fee payments for Scottish students to major capital investment projects (such as £52 million through the City Region Deal, as well as joint investment with NHS Scotland in landmark projects such as the bioQuarter). Given the tight relationship between the university sector and the vision for a more sustainable and equitable

future for Scotland, it is all the more important to give due scrutiny to adverse outcomes of recent university management.