

Subject: Request from Joint Unions at University of Edinburgh for Committee scrutiny

Attention: Education, Children and Young People Committee of Scottish Parliament

26 March 2025

Dear Mr Douglas Ross MSP, convenor, and members of the above-mentioned Committee,

Re: University of Edinburgh Joint Unions, composed of recognized staff unions, University and College Union (UCU), Unison and Unite, request for scrutiny of University of Edinburgh (UoE) Principal and senior management by the Scottish Parliament Education, Children and Young People Committee

Given your Committee's remit, we are writing to request the Committee's consideration for Vice-Chancellor (VC) Professor Peter Mathieson to be invited for cross-examination on matters including UoE management's use of public funds, their legal responsibilities and the effective governance of UoE under the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act.

The three unions comprising Joint Unions represent thousands of staff at the University of Edinburgh. We act on behalf of our members, but also engage in consultations and negotiations on terms and conditions for all staff, and on University policies that affect them.

The Principal is proposing to cut £140m from the UoE budget over 18 months, which will entail massive job losses. This decision, announced on 25 February 2025, raises significant concerns about effective planning, budgeting and governance at the institution. Extensive restructuring is also being proposed, to date with no consultations with or input from recognized trade unions. The questions below have repeatedly been asked by our unions, and members of the University community, but have not been adequately answered by management. Specifically, we would like to draw to your attention as matters we hope can be investigated by your Committee:

- The question of why UoE is proposing a cut of this magnitude (around 10%), significantly [larger than those at comparable institutions](#), when its most recent published accounts (2023-24) show a surplus, student recruitment in 2024-25 has increased across all fee categories, based on a projected future deficit;
- Despite repeated requests for full disclosure (as required by law) of the financial situation that management claims requires cuts at this scale, Joint Unions have not been provided with access to key data and forecasting on which projections of a future deficit rely;
- Questions of financial management, budgeting and spending plans, such as whether planning and forecasting to date has been fit for purpose, when positive forecasts were being presented last academic year; whether the University's capital spending has been excessive ([as Joint Unions contend](#));

and whether the University management is scaling back capital spending plans to address the projected deficit, and if so in what ways;

- Whether management has been fully transparent with the University Court in these matters, allowing it to exercise proper scrutiny of management's decisions on finances, planning and budgeting;
- University management's troubling track record of poor management and cost overruns in implementation of centralisation projects, notably the People and Money system, and the consequent lack of confidence of Joint Unions and staff in the Principal and the senior leadership teams' capacity to effectively implement change programmes at the scale being proposed;
- The failure of UoE management to consider alternatives to job cuts of this scale, as this risks an evident breach of its legal responsibility to prevent redundancies.

Joint Unions are of the view that proceeding with this scale of cuts is unnecessary, irresponsible and will be deeply damaging to a key institution that plays a central role in realizing the Scottish Government's ambitions for education and research. Cuts at this scale, we contend, could severely depress UoE's revenue, while also being devastating for students, staff, and the national community: redundancies, axed courses, barriers to generating future income, and irreversible harm in areas like quality education delivery and student pastoral support, which is already operationally overwhelmed and under-resourced.

The UoE's proposals are directly relevant to numerous Government commitments and principles relating to higher education. These proposed cuts and redundancies are happening, for instance, just a year after the Scottish Government launched its International Education Strategy (alongside Going Global Edinburgh, the British Council, Universities Scotland, and Colleges Scotland) to position Scotland as "a world leader in education, research, and knowledge exchange" and to state Holyrood's "collective aim to create the conditions for our universities and colleges to continue to flourish" (Scot Gov, 2024).

While we recognize that the overall situation for higher education in Scotland and the UK is challenging, and our unions are calling for urgent changes to the funding system (while maintaining free tuition for students resident in Scotland), UoE has very significant reserves and there are other ways to address any downturn in income levels. Indeed, Joint Unions have repeatedly expressed our willingness to work with management to identify cost savings and find a way towards sustainability, provided compulsory redundancies are taken off the table for a specified time period, and UoE commits to ruling out outsourcing. However, to date, management has not been willing to engage in meaningful negotiations with us on these matters.

Given this situation, UCU Edinburgh has consulted its members on industrial action to oppose compulsory redundancies and will soon be launching a formal industrial action ballot. Unison's members are also being consulted on industrial action. We take these measures as a last resort, and they are

intended to press UoE management to reverse course and return to the negotiating table.

We call on the Committee to use its investigatory powers, including related to accessing critical internal information, summoning witnesses, and creating recommendations, to interrogate the basis for and necessity of these severe cuts by a body receiving millions in public and Scottish Funding Council (SFC) funding. The Scottish Government has a duty towards the students and staff of UoE, and this is especially vital considering the devastating potential professional, economic, and personal impacts of the proposed cuts.

Committee action, and the need for proper planning on the University's part, is of critical importance before permanent damage is done to the largest university in Scotland, to the local and national economy, and to our international reputation.

We welcomed the Committee's incisive and probing questioning of senior management and the acting chair of Court at the University of Dundee last week. While UoE is not asking for public money to fill an urgent funding gap, we believe that there are many parallels in the two institutions in terms of failures of planning, governance and transparency and accountability. At UoE, we have seen overspending in a number of areas, including excessive capital spending and on expensive and poorly planned IT projects. The scale of the proposed cuts raise serious questions about the role of governance bodies and their capacity to effectively scrutinize the financial plans and decisions of UoE management in recent years. We are happy to provide more information to substantiate these points, and others above, should you require it.

The Joint Unions Finance Working Group, composed of academics and professional staff, with a range of expertise, has analyzed the University's publicly available financial information, and raised a great many questions about all these matters, which have largely gone unanswered. Our series of posts is linked below.

Given that the UoE Principal has stated that the proposed changes will begin immediately, we urge you to hold a hearing to question him and other members of the senior leadership team as soon as possible. If you wish to discuss this matter with us, our respective contact information is at the head of this e-mail. We are also providing this letter as an attachment.

Yours sincerely,

June Maguire, Branch Secretary, Unison

Mark Patrizio, Branch Chair, Unite, Convenor of UoE Joint Unions Liaison Committee

Sophia Woodman, Branch President, UCU Edinburgh

Joint Unions Finance Working Group analysis:

1. [Dire financial straits at UoE? No!](#) 26 November 2024
2. [Is the University of Edinburgh's management financially prudent? No!](#) 13 December 2024

3. [Misleading and partial data in management's 'crisis' narrative](#) 19 December 2024
4. No compulsory redundancies at the University of Edinburgh! [Management is manufacturing a 'financial crisis' to impose staff cuts](#) 14 February 2025
5. [Cuts could kill our university](#) 28 February 2025
6. [Cutting revenue is not the way to solve financial pressures](#) 14 March 2025
7. [Reckless downsizing: the 'logics' of management's cuts](#) 21 March 2025