

Clare Adamson MSP
Convenor,
Education and Skills Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

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Dear Clare

I'd like to wish you a happy new year, however, I cannot see the next few years being happy ones for the university sector given the proposals in last month's draft Scottish budget. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance proposes to make real terms cuts to both the higher education capital and revenue budgets. These cuts are likely to have damaging consequences for students and staff in the sector, and makes it more difficult for universities to deliver for Scotland's economy and wider society.

The Scottish Government's stated priority is education, rightly so given its ability to empower individuals, enhance communities, and drive our economy. This taken, it seems contradictory for the draft budget to be proposing further real terms cuts to universities in the coming financial year. The University and College Union would like to ask for your support for the higher education sector during the passage of the budget bill and for the future, to challenge these cuts and to ensure that the sector is adequately funded.

It is worth mentioning that higher education is already a sector which is under financial strain. UCU is challenging jobs cuts at Edinburgh's Queen Margaret University right now, with the employer proposing to cut ten per cent of its workforce. We know that job losses are on the agenda at the University of the West of Scotland, which follow on the heels of staff reductions at Heriot Watt in 2017-18. Workloads are spiralling with staff-student ratios increasing which does nothing to support our widening access ambitions. Scotland has a higher proportion of higher education institutions in deficit than the rest of the UK, and the 2016 Audit Scotland report on higher education institutions underlined the disparate nature of universities' finances in Scotland. We are clear that education should be a priority, and should be funded effectively, and certainly not subject to continued cuts and salami-slicing of the two main teaching and

research grants on an annual basis. Further cuts, like the ones proposed in the draft Scottish budget, do threaten the quality of our system in Scotland, and will have an impact upon students and staff.

Universities Scotland has estimated that the amount universities will have to spend on teaching and research as a result the draft budget will be £130million less in real terms than the comparable sum in 2014/15. In itself this creates problems for universities, but together with the uncertainty of Brexit, and the UK Treasury changes to the Scottish Teachers Pension Scheme, Scottish universities are facing an almost perfect storm of reduced funding at a time of increasing costs outwith their control. The Scottish Teachers Pension Scheme changes, which emanate from UK Treasury directions, will increase the employer contributions for post-92 universities (where academic staff are members of this scheme), by an estimated £8million a year. For pre-92 universities, the changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme will also mean increased employer contributions to maintain a viable pension scheme. These increasing costs at a time when funding from the Scottish Government is reducing is deeply worrying.

The draft budget will, in the coming weeks, go through the Parliament's budget scrutiny process, and we know that we are in challenging financial times. However, higher education should not be an easy target for an administration looking for budget cuts at any time, given the sector's importance to the economy, society and the nation's wellbeing. Given the financial challenges, and uncertainty the sector is currently facing, we are urging you to support us to do what you can to change the budget proposals as they affect universities.

UCU is aware that similar concerns on the budget's impact on higher education are shared by Universities Scotland and the National Union of Students, and we would urge you to join with us to support our universities.

We would be happy to meet with you to outline our concerns further if that would be helpful. In the meantime, please be in touch if you have any queries about this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Senior
UCU Scotland official

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