

Submission 6, dated 23 March 2022

This is my 25th year of teaching at Edinburgh College of Art (part of the University of Edinburgh since 2011) and this is the first time I have written to my MSPs. It is about the industrial action that is currently taking place at 11 universities across Scotland (including Glasgow), in disputes over pensions, pay and working conditions. Our branch of has been on strike for 15 days this month. It is not an exaggeration to say that, with 6000 members of university staff on strike, there is currently a crisis in Scottish Universities.

My students are wonderful and fully supportive of the UCU strike action (despite the fact that few are familiar with histories of industrial action). However, on top of the pandemic, they are patiently seeing their learning environment deteriorate and suffer interruption after interruption. Having children in their 20s, I also identify with this generation and the generations who will follow.

We are writing to you in the hope that the Education, Children and Young People Committee can start a full Committee inquiry into the management of Scotland's universities. We think there are failures of governance that have both brought us to the present crisis and, through inaction, are sustaining it. We believe that Parliamentary scrutiny can help understand the underlying causes of the current dispute with a view to a securing the resolution that we need.

Many issues around this crisis overlap – from pay, job insecurity, unmanageable workloads and yawning pay gaps concerning gender (15.5%), race (17%) and disability (9%). In my view, universities are now founded on the rampant use of insecure contracts, serious equality failings, staff burnout and falling pay. Such circumstances cannot deliver the best for students in Scotland, which is why our campaign has the support of the National Union of Students (NUS) Scotland. As I mentioned above, my own students have nothing but support for our position, despite their own anxieties.

I personally have a different public pension scheme, but on behalf of my colleagues, I know that the current dispute is an attack on my colleagues who are in the private USS fund, some of whose members are having their pensions cut by a staggering 42%. The pension issue is complex but at the heart of it is, I believe, a dysfunction in governance that affects all of Scotland's universities: that the USS fund is being managed by leaders to the fiscal advantage of institutions rather than for the benefit of its members in retirement.

The University of Edinburgh enjoys 'larger than expected fiscal surplus' and Principal Peter Mathieson continues to insist that the UCU's compromise proposals are 'unaffordable'. Logically, only one or other of these positions can be true; we think this variance raises important questions.

I would really appreciate it if the Education, Children and Young People Committee scrutinised the fiscal position of Scotland's universities, of managers' claims of

pension 'unaffordability', and of their ongoing dependence on insecure contracts and indefensible pay gaps.