

UCU Scotland Submission to the Education and Culture Committee Inquiry into Scotland's potential educational and cultural future

UCU Scotland

The University and College Union (UCU) is the largest trade union in the Post-16 education sector in the UK, representing 120,000 academic and related members across the UK, and is the largest union in the higher education sector in Scotland. UCU Scotland has autonomous status within the UK wide University and College Union, reflecting the distinctive character of Scotland's educational system and devolution.

UCU Scotland is pleased to be asked to give evidence to the Committee. We were asked specifically to submit evidence on higher education and immigration and also the basis for charging students from the rest of the UK tuition fees both at the moment and in the event of Scotland becoming independent.

Summary

- UCU Scotland is and intends to remain neutral in the referendum debate;
- We believe that participation in higher education should be based on ability and not background or income;
- We oppose tuition fees both to Scottish domiciled students and those living in the rest of the UK;
- UCU Scotland believes the Scottish Government should make clear its position on the legal basis for RUK students being charged fees in the event of a yes vote;
- We believe that immigration caps should be removed and the Fresh Talent Initiative reinstated;
- We seek assurances that the Scottish Government is engaged in discussion with UK research councils and decision makers over the continuation of UK wide research funding should Scotland become independent; and
- UCU Scotland supports the continuation of UK wide collective pay bargaining.

Introduction

UCU Scotland has no preference for one particular constitutional settlement for Scotland, and is not intending to favour one option over another in the run up to the referendum. However, the union has a vital role in engaging with our members in the referendum debate, and to consider the impact constitutional changes could have on education, wider society and the economy. UCU has a vision for higher education in Scotland whatever the outcome of the vote in September which includes:

- Publicly funded institutions without student fees;
- Maintaining Scotland's distinctive education system including the Honours degree; and
- Defence of academic freedom and ending casual contracts for staff

Some of the content and themes from this evidence is taken from UCU Scotland's **Manifesto for Scottish Referendum 2014**.

Funding of Higher Education and Student Support

UCU Scotland believes that higher education in Scotland should continue to be free at the point of entry and opposes undergraduate tuition fees. Intellectual ability, not family background and income should determine participation, and that is why we oppose an undergraduate student contribution. It is right that students who benefit from higher than average incomes should pay something back – but they should do so through progressive income tax. Business depends on graduates and should make a contribution rather than receiving tax breaks. Higher education should be substantially paid for through general taxation. It is worth noting that in the UK we spend less than two per cent of GDP on higher education while most comparable countries now spend more. Higher education has a vital role in developing a vibrant economy and attracting young people with talent. At least matching levels of HE spending to that of comparable countries is a necessary step towards achieving this.

UCU Scotland disputes the notion that education is currently free in Scotland as students pay for their living costs through student and otherwise obtained commercial loans, alongside part-time work. UCU Scotland has expressed concerns over undergraduate dropout rates due to financial and other related concerns and commended the Scottish Government for increasing the level of support and ensuring all students will have access to some form of maintenance. This student support package should be maintained to ensure that all those that can benefit from higher education are able to do so. UCU Scotland also notes that where tuition fees are charged in the UK we have seen a market established where there is competition between institutions competing on price.

The Committee has asked for our view on the legal position on students from the rest of the UK (RUK) being charged tuition fees and how that would change were Scotland to become an independent country.

The Scottish Government's white paper indicates that the Scottish Government would intend in the event of Scotland becoming independent to continue charging RUK students tuition fees while Scottish domiciled or those coming from other EU countries would not pay. This has clearly been a matter of some debate but the Scottish Government maintain

a case could be made to allow them to do so under EU law given the shared border and common language between Scotland and other RUK neighbours.

UCU oppose tuition fees both in Scotland and in the rest of the UK. We oppose RUK domiciled students being charged tuition fees in Scotland as happens at the moment for exactly the same reasons we do for Scottish students. It was unfortunate that the current RUK fee system, enabling institutions to charge up to £9k a year, was introduced in Scotland with little debate on alternative approaches.

UCU Scotland has not sought our own legal advice on the legality of students from RUK being charged fees post independence but we do note the legal view sought by Universities Scotland suggesting that there may be a basis for an objective justification. It is our view that the Scottish Government should more clearly indicate its position. It cannot be left to non-government sectoral bodies alone to seek the answers to such critical questions.

Higher education and immigration

Higher education is an international enterprise, depending on the free movement of both staff and students. Students from Scotland benefit from international students being on their courses and the broadening of experience and perspectives many of these students will bring. The introduction of the UK points-based immigration system is damaging international engagement, to very little purpose and preventing the free movement of staff and students. In general terms Scotland does not have great concerns about an immigration influx and should relax rules which could lead to greater recruitment of students, though they may be put off by negative perceptions of the UK system. Further, the fresh talent initiative should be reintroduced. The initiative gave graduates a two-year work visa. This was pioneered in Scotland before becoming UK wide and was then removed by the current UK coalition Government. UCU Scotland believe it should be reintroduced and recommends immigration caps be removed and the Fresh Talent Initiative reinstated.

Research funding

The Committee did not specifically ask UCU Scotland's views on the impact on the referendum on the funding of research but given that the Research Councils are presently UK wide and are one of the few areas that have not been devolved then UCU Scotland feel the Committee should consider the question as part of their work in this inquiry.

Presently Scotland is regarded as doing well from the councils in that we obtain around 13% of grants from competitive funding which is higher than a simple population share would give us. Overall Scotland receives around 10% of all research funding. Scotland also has a higher percentage of our universities in the high impact research category than in England. The Scottish Government's white paper envisages UK wide funding arrangements continuing and Scotland continuing to do well both on a UK playing field but also increasingly from sources outwith the UK too. Much of what will remain or be put in place post any 'yes' vote would be negotiated on post September 2014. UCU Scotland believes that the need for continued research funding is a given regardless of the constitutional set up, and that it is vital that research investment is maintained to ensure our universities' continued success and to support high quality research in Scotland. Given this UCU Scotland would seek assurances that the Scottish Government are engaged with both UK funding bodies and decision makers to ensure that there is an appetite to maintain UK wide bodies and that discussions are not on hold till after the referendum on such a critical question to the sector.

As a union we are less convinced of the current method of allocating research funding, both here in Scotland and south of the border. The recent Research Excellence Framework assessed the quality of research in the UK, but we believe it is already having unintended consequences in Universities. There needs to be a less high stakes research funding system, and a fairer way of recognising and rewarding the diversity of research in universities, which does not polarise university career paths, nor penalise those working to longer term or localised research goals.

Labour markets, pensions and collective bargaining

As the largest trade union in the higher education sector in Scotland and across the UK we unashamedly approach the debate from the perspective of our members. Universities currently maintain collective pay bargaining arrangements on a UK-wide basis, reflecting the vast labour market for the sector, which for many institutions and disciplines operate not only at a UK level, but at a worldwide level. Scotland has a very diverse university sector, with world leading institutions, small specialist institutions, ancient and modern universities, as well as institutions which serve local communities as well as having unique applied research specialism. It is important that the sector is able to negotiate pay on a fair, efficient and sector led basis; and from both employers and employees' perspectives there is a strong case for continued cross border arrangements whatever the result in September.

Academic and related staff in Pre-92 institutions in Scotland are members of the Universities Superannuation Scheme. Academic staff in Post-92 universities are members of the Scottish Teachers' Superannuation Scheme, with support staff across the sector being members of a variety of local government pension schemes or some institutional based schemes. Sustainability of pension provision is crucial for the sector, regardless of the constitutional set up

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