

Response to SFC call for evidence on the Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education

Queen Margaret University branch of University College Union (QMU UCU)

QMU UCU is the largest recognised union at the university, representing academic and academic-related staff. This response to SFC's call for evidence was compiled on behalf of the branch committee, drawing on extensive consultations and discussions with members over the past three years concerning the future of the institution. Discussions have also been had with UCU Scotland and with branch representatives from UCU and EIS at other institutions of higher education (HE) in Edinburgh. However, since the window available to provide evidence for this review has been short, and during the summer months when many staff are taking leave, the opportunity for wider consultation amongst the members on the content of this response has not been available.

We welcome the importance given to Universities in the Report of the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery, albeit with concerns about the narrow, instrumental focus in which economic recovery and the roles of universities, have been cast. Universities have a central role in social, civic and cultural recovery, as well as the academic freedom to question and challenge areas of policy and polity. Thus, whilst we believe that universities have a role well beyond meeting business and employer needs, nonetheless, we welcome the report's recommendation that:

The Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Government should protect universities and colleges from the financial impact of the crisis, so that they can maintain and enhance their role as 'anchor institutions' and take decisive steps to align their teaching and learning provision, including postgraduate skills training, to meet business and employer needs; and to focus their support for research investment and growth.

Moreover, we agree with the report's assertion that

The central importance of the role of education in the reconstruction of the economy is unarguable, and the breadth of what this means needs to be reconsidered. ... Our universities are the envy of many around the world. We must protect them but also leverage them to greater effect ... We need an education-led recovery.

We would argue that the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery provides an excessively instrumental role for universities, a corrective to which is well provided by the work of the [Just and Green Recovery](#) coalition of civil society organisations, of which UCU Scotland is a signatory, and for which a greater diversity of functions for HE will be essential. The post-lockdown recovery is a threat to the HE sector in Scotland, but it is also an opportunity to rejuvenate the sector to play its part as a critical component of lifelong education, supported by public resources yet autonomous from state and economy, with an important

role in tackling the social challenges of the future and the injustices so clearly exposed during the public health emergency.

Diversity and sustainability

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the funding regime of HE was unsustainable. In 2019, Audit Scotland noted that public investment in HE had declined by 7% in three years and pointed out the under-funding of publicly funded education (by 8%) and research (by 20%) in the sector. Efficiency savings compatible with quality have long since been exhausted. Audit Scotland had previously pointed out the underlying risks associated with the extremely skewed financial distribution within the sector: most reserves, income and surpluses are concentrated in the four ancient institutions while the seven modern universities, including QMU, are heavily reliant on declining Scottish Government funding. This is partly the result of continued underfunding which has encouraged universities to make up for shortfalls with commercial activities (including international student fees), an option which has been more difficult for the smaller institutions such as QMU. Covid-19 has had a particularly severe impact on commercial activities which has exposed the fragility of this business model throughout the sector, although larger institutions with significant reserves and surpluses and higher levels of commercialisation have been more affected by the fall in international students than have smaller institutions. The sector is therefore faced with a complex crisis in which large ancient universities have short term cash flow problems but the security of significant reserves, but small post-92 institutions face medium term budget challenges but the impact on cash flow, whilst significant, is less severe.

A recent analysis conducted for [Frontier Economics](#) cited QMU as one of 21 universities that are most at risk following the COVID-19 pandemic, on the basis of five measures of financial difficulty. The report highlights that the institutions most at risk are also those who attract a high proportion of students from state schools and under-represented areas and social groups. Loss of such institutions, either through bankruptcy or merger, would have a detrimental effect on key social objectives of providing access to HE for all able to benefit from it. QMU UCU believes that this vulnerability is not inevitable, and action is needed to protect small institutions such as QMU which are providing an important role in widening access to higher education. Such action across the sector requires adequate funding, a reassessment of the business model and associated problems of higher education governance.

UCU believes that there is a problem of governance in the sector. The reforms of the 2016 Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act were positive, but inadequate to change the prevailing governance model which resembles corporate businesses. Court memberships continue to be disproportionately drawn from local business and financial interests and retired senior academics, and inadequately represent the diversity of the communities they serve, or could serve, and especially those who could benefit most from wider educational provision. Strategic decision making is increasingly centralised and standardised, with risks to academic freedom, collegiality and peer-reviewed scholarship, as well as public service, social justice and community accountability. Along with other HE institutions, QMU faces these pressures which require more significant reform of HE governance.

In 2018-19 UCU was in dispute with QMU in an attempt to avoid job losses which have resulted in increased workload for the remaining staff. There are longstanding concerns about stress, managerialism and deprofessionalisation which have been exacerbated by the job losses. While industrial relations have considerably improved, QMU UCU remains concerned about workload and the relative allocation of resources to 'front line' education, research, scholarship, professional support and student services. During the dispute, members of UCU and other unions came up with initiatives through which jobs could be saved finances stabilised and collegiate working practices revived through flatter structures and more professional autonomy. We believe that many of these suggestions would contribute to future cohesion and sustainability of the institution. Some of the proposals were published in a document called '[Towards a Co-operative University: a manifesto of ideas and influence](#)', which argued that a diverse sector in Scotland which ensures sustainability for small modern institutions alongside large ancient universities, as well as the chartered and specialist institutions is both possible and desirable. Moreover, this would require a reform of the business model away from markets and quasi-markets, to build in flatter structures, reduced managerialism, collegiate decision making, collective responsibility and community accountability. This requires security of public funding.

The SFC review needs to recognise the value of diversity in the sector. Collaboration and cooperation is essential, but any erosion of the autonomy of institutions risks centralisation, elitism, the loss of distinctiveness and at worst, hostile takeovers. On the other hand, retaining the distinctiveness of different institutions must prevent the development of a two-tier or multi-tier sector. The strengths of institutions such as QMU in providing access to higher education for local communities and families without a tradition of university entrance needs to be protected without this leading to a diminution of the status of such regionally important institutions. It is essential that the value of the education that we provide, our research capacity and our staff terms and conditions are all protected at the same time as recognising that our strengths may be different. Parity of esteem needs to accompany diversity of provision.

[New business models for a diverse sector](#)

UCU is committed to the sustainability of QMU and its distinctiveness as a small, regionally important, internationally committed niche institution with a unique history and commitment to social justice and relevance. The institution's history in the women's movement of the nineteenth century and access to vocational and academic education for working class women remains important. QMU's size means that it is able to be fleet of foot and offer distinctive courses, or standard courses in distinctive ways, and create an intimate learning community in which students are known to and supported by staff, and which facilitates interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work. This is appreciated by students, in particular 'non-traditional' students: working class, mature and first in family to access higher education. This facilitates wider participation even when such 'non-traditional' students do not necessarily always meet the criteria for the national wider access targets applied by the Office of Fair Access.

Social relevance and public accountability does not equate to the number of start-up companies generated by graduates; or business partnerships; or demand from employers;

or the attraction of commercial contracts for knowledge exchange. Social relevance is largely un-commercial, involves partnerships with impoverished communities or professional practices working in areas of health and social need, supporting causes that do not attract commercial funding. There is something explicitly un-commercial about scholarship, which has developed over time and requires long term investment, and which marketisation undermines. Commercialisation risks degrading the value of Scottish academia.

QMU has a relatively new, purpose-built campus which enhances the learning environment and teaching facilities. It also limits the size of the university in terms of both students and staff. Moreover, the repayment of loans for the campus building is significant expenditure. As a result, the campus is too often regarded as an income generator rather than as a community asset. In the 2018-19 local dispute, UCU proposed part-mutualising of campus buildings. The buildings which facilitate education are a public good, not a private asset, and the social benefits, as well as the financial risks, should therefore be socialised.

There is increasing worldwide interest in cooperative universities in which the institutions are owned and governed by those with a direct stake in their sustainability. A range of models are currently in practice or proposal, including the first such cooperative university in Mondragon, in the Spanish Basque Country, and the UK Cooperative University in the process of development under English 2016 Higher Education Act. SFC's review and the challenges of post-Covid recovery, is an ideal opportunity to facilitate the development of cooperative universities and other alternative mutual and socially owned models in Scotland.

QMU UCU's vision of the future is that higher education is not constrained by fluctuations in school leavers or demands of employers, but stimulated by social need. Higher education should be available to all. For some, that will mean full time study towards a four year honours degree. For others it will mean short courses in which the best of academic research is combined with actions to improve quality of life in order to make knowledge accessible to those most excluded by social processes. Flexible provision requires short term experimentation within long term sustainability, and facilitation of extending academic work beyond the confines of the campus.

Just transition is iconic example of why HE sector needs to work with government and other sectors in order to deliver social benefit which is impossible in a market-led predict and provide approach. Just transition is the trade union movement's response to the challenge of responding to the climate emergency by transitioning to a zero carbon economy whilst retaining and enhancing the jobs and incomes of those currently dependent on the unsustainable economy, and this has been recognised by the Scottish Government in the establishment of the Just Transition Commission. The Just Transition to a zero carbon economy will require research and the provision of flexible education and training to citizens at different stages of their lives and careers. Research suggests that investment in tertiary education is a necessary component of delivering a just transition¹. The Scottish Just Transition Commission published its interim report prior to its consideration of the role of education and training, but its inclusion of a session specifically addressing education and skills suggests that it has recognised the importance of this sector.

Collaboration versus marketisation

Collaboration between institutions is an important way in which government funding of universities can best be realised as coherent higher education. Such collaboration can occur at a national and regional level, as recognised in the review briefing. Trade unions have a sustained commitment to, and longstanding experience of collaboration through the principle of solidarity, and trade union members constantly collaborate across institutions, disciplines and employment-roles to protect and enhance working conditions. Trade unions should be partners in any restructuring of the sector to enhance collaboration. Academics are familiar with collaboration, which enhances scholarship and on which the principle of peer-review is based. Collaboration and coherence is second nature to the workers in the sector.

However, it is necessary to recognise, challenge and deconstruct the barriers to collaboration: competition between institutions, for students and research income generated by spurious metrics and structures to promote excellence through a misguided ideological belief that market competition drives up quality. On the contrary, quality is compromised by competition: scholarship is suppressed under pressure of volume teaching; costs are cut and workload increased; staff-student ratios are driven up; employment conditions are increasingly casualised; there are increases in New Public Management techniques of performance management driven by the need to chase KPIs and other metrics; resources are wasted on activities irrelevant to education, research and scholarship; senior management remuneration is driven up. Post-lockdown planning has demonstrated the pressure to return to campus teaching coming from senior management (with associated health and safety risks) is partly driven by competition for students / income. Policy initiatives which artificially militate against collaboration and contribute nothing to quality – the NSS, REF, TEF and other metrics that contribute to league tables – should be abolished. Scotland has the opportunity to withdraw from these imposed structures.

The richness associated with diversity means that institutions may not always be required to fulfil the same outcomes or meet the same demands, whilst of course all must meet common standards in relation to education and research quality, as well as responsibilities as employers and public institutions. One example from QMU which may be worth highlighting. QMU UCU is proud of QMU's history as an institution established to provide access to education for working class women. The institution continues disproportionately to attract female and working class students and the staff body has a higher proportion of women. It would be appropriate for the university to continue to have a particular focus on the disadvantages, discriminations and violations experienced by women, and held accountable for its pursuit of such objectives. However, since the same equality criteria are applied across all institutions (for example in Ministerial Letters and Outcome Agreements, as well as voluntary codes such as Athena SWAN), QMU is facing demands to attract more men into particular courses. This is not to say that it would not be beneficial to have more male nurses and primary school teachers, but since the under-representation of men in these courses and professions is not due to discrimination against men, or structural injustices against men in society, it should not be the responsibility of a university that

focuses on challenging discrimination and structural injustice against women to address the reasons for male under-representation.

Collaboration versus amalgamation

SFC should explicitly rule out any imposed mergers of institutions. The experience of mergers and attempted mergers in tertiary education in Scotland has been universally negative and unpopular. Mergers have led to centralisation, turf-wars, hostile takeovers, asset stripping, staff redundancies and there is no evidence to suggest that a mechanism can be found to enhance coherence and sustainability while protecting diversity and conditions through amalgamation. Any restructuring of the sector should be with the assent of the trade unions that represent the staff.

There may be opportunities for further collaboration between institutions however that do not risk unwelcome merger, which may be valuable on a regional level. QMU forms part of the ecosystem of post-compulsory education provision in and around Edinburgh, which for HE includes, alongside QMU: University of Edinburgh, Heriot Watt, Edinburgh Napier as well as the headquarters of the Open University in Scotland and the Edinburgh campus of SRUC. At the same time Edinburgh School of Art and Moray House Institute of Education have struggled to retain elements of their distinctive identities, despite being merged into larger institutions. QMU works closely with Colleges in the region, including Edinburgh, West Lothian, Fife and Newbattle Abbey. The value to Edinburgh and the region of the tertiary education sector is economic, social and cultural. It helps to provide access to the benefits of education well beyond the curriculum of the courses provided to matriculated students, but to a wider range of citizens, communities, local businesses and voluntary sector organisations, including the provision of services to city; the public role of academics; employment; skills; diversity; internationalism; cosmopolitan; cultural activities; trade union activity; and democracy. Any reduction to the size, breadth and diversity of the sector would have a negative impact on the city and the region.

However, the importance of tertiary education to the city/region could have benefits for cohesion and sustainability. SFC might look to the achievements of the 'Preston model', which treats tertiary education institutions as 'anchor institutions' which, because of their size and economic activity can stimulate local economic activity through local supply chains, local employment, local services etc. This has been used to stimulate cooperatives and social enterprises, and local and cooperative economic development, and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) in Preston, has been central to this. This role has been acknowledged by the Report of the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery, but the full opportunities that this implies has not been fully explored. Understanding the economic and social value of tertiary education institutions and how this interacts with their education and scholarship roles will be of value to several Scottish regions, and potentially to Scotland as a whole.

Moreover, the problem of HE governance might be addressed at a regional and national level, with the potential establishment of tiers of governance and accountability involving all key stakeholders, HE, FE, schools and non-formal education (pre-school, CLD, retirement),

including staff trade unions, students' unions, academic bodies, local communities, interest groups and local businesses. Valuable work in democratic governance of higher education in the English context has been carried out under the auspices of the [Centre for Labour and Social Studies](#).ⁱⁱ There is an opportunity to explore ideas for greater collaboration which also address the current problems in the sector, such as casualisation of employment conditions. Scotland could lead the way with providing secure employment guarantees to university staff which can be exchangeable between institutions without risk. A body of staff who have secure employment conditions but who can transfer these between institutions without detriment, will provide a considerably more coherent and sustainable education, research and scholarship than staff whose careers are dependent on a series of separate, zero hours, term-time only or constantly renewed fixed term contracts with different institutions.

Conclusion

Scotland has an outstanding HE sector. COVID-19 and Brexit provide particular challenges, but the sector needs to be central to the recovery. To do so it needs adequate funding and the decade-plus long decline in public funding needs to be reversed. However the recovery also provides an opportunity for a Just and Green Recovery, for which HE and the trade union movement have important roles, in particular for the provision of lifelong education and a Just Transition to a zero carbon economy. In this, the diversity of the sector must be protected, and in particular the value of small modern institutions such as QMU, which provide quality education and student support which is valued at a regional level and by non-traditional students, alongside high quality international research and scholarship. The specific issues of medium term sustainability for such institutions need to be addressed with adequate and long term secure funding. For the HE sector as a whole, the recovery is an opportunity to address the particular problems of inequality, marketisation, casualisation, competition and unaccountable governance by developing more regional, cooperative and democratic structures. The trade unions that represent the staff who deliver the work of the sector need to be central to this transition.

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ⁱ Eg Cha, J.M. 2019. From the dirty past to the clean future: Addressing historic energy injustices with a just transition to a low-carbon future. In Jafry, T. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Climate Justice*. London and New York: Routledge

ⁱⁱ See, particularly David Ridley's chapter 'Co-inquiry, democratisation and public ownership: Anchoring our universities back in the community' in *A New Vision for Further and Higher Education*. CLASS