

2014

Manifesto for Scotland's Referendum



UCU Scotland calls for all sides in the referendum debate to fully **recognise the benefits of post-16 education to Scottish society, health and culture – and to the economy. Scottish higher education sustains the professional workforce**, the fundamental research, and the intellectual engagement essential to public and private enterprise within a thriving democracy. It makes a **crucial contribution to cultural development. It enriches the lives of those who engage with it – to the benefit of society as a whole.**

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UCU MANIFESTO FOR SCOTLAND'S REFERENDUM

Introduction

The University and College Union 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. It has autonomous status within the UK-wide University and College Union, reflecting the distinctive character of Scotland's educational system and Scotland's devolved constitution.

Referendum debate

UCU has no express 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 on Scottish independence. However, the union has a vital role in engaging our members in the referendum debate, and to consider the impact constitutional changes could have on education, wider society and the economy. UCU therefore has a vision for higher education in Scotland whatever the outcome of the referendum which includes:

- publicly funded institutions without student tuition fees
- maintaining Scotland's distinctive education system including the honours degree
- defence of academic freedom and ending casual contracts for staff.

Devolution

Education is already one of the most devolved areas in Scotland due to historic differences in both school and post-school education, as compared to the rest of the UK. Prior to devolution in 1999, the higher education budget and policy was decided by the Scottish Office, with a Scottish Higher Education Funding Council established in 1992. Devolution has led to further divergence in higher education policies, particularly on issues such as tuition fees.



Funding of higher education

UCU 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. The state of the economy and public spending levels have an impact upon public funding particularly for unprotected sectors such as HE. Continued and sustainable research funding is vitally important to Scottish higher education, and universities need to know whether funding will be provided on a cross-border basis in the event of independence, or via a separate Scottish body.

Student support

UCU disputes the notion that education is free as students pay for their living costs through student and commercial loans, and part-time work. UCU has expressed concerns over undergraduate dropout rates due to financial and other related concerns and we commend the Scottish Government on increasing the level of support and ensuring all students will have access to some form of maintenance. It has been a concern that some students are not able to access support if they are estranged from parents and the new support scheme is ahead of the rest of the UK in addressing this issue. This student support package should be maintained to ensure that all those that can benefit from higher education are able to do so.

Defence of the four-year honours degree

The Scottish four-year honours degree sets a world standard for depth, breadth, and flexibility allowing articulation into later years for those suitably qualified. It meets or exceeds the Bologna criteria in Europe. A three-year degree, combined with extended schooling, would be a costly alternative and intellectually unjustified. The four-year honours degree should be maintained.



Staff

University staff are fundamental to the teaching, research, support and knowledge exchange within the sector. Workers within the university sector are highly skilled and specialised. Career paths in the sector mean that academic staff have undertaken a long professional apprenticeship with a high level of personal commitment

to their discipline and to students, sacrificing the chance of quick financial rewards. Many benefits of academic life have been eroded over recent decades. Workloads have increased sharply, pervasive managerialism has eroded independence, and job security has been much reduced. Poorly thought-out performance measurement criteria and resourcing models risk undermining scholarship and teaching quality, and will hamper the ability to think creatively and criticise established ideas.

University support staff and academic-related staff share their academic colleagues' commitment to the values of their institutions. It is vital that Scotland recognises and values the people working in the sector, and supports them and their creativity.

Governance and academic freedom

Significant work has been undertaken on enhancing university governance in Scotland over recent years. UCU strongly supports the recommendations of the Professor Von Prondzynski review of higher education governance, and is calling for their full implementation. We also consider that the sector in the rest of the UK could benefit from the work on governance that has taken place in Scotland. Academic freedom is enshrined in the Scottish Further and Higher Education Act 2005. However, underfunding and market pressures threaten good governance and academic freedom, as university managers work to get more for less, often with cheap casualised labour, and strive towards the concept of teaching and research 'excellence'. Competition induced by the market along with managerialism works to undermine the traditional collegiality of the academy and the value of education for education's sake. It seems unlikely that different constitutional settlements will reduce the influence of the market on higher education in Scotland. UCU believes that better, inclusive and transparent governance systems, which value the academy, staff and students can make a positive difference.



Research

The Research Councils are presently UK-wide and are one of the few areas that have not been devolved.

Presently Scotland is perceived to do well from the councils in obtaining about 13% of grants which is higher than the share Scotland would be due by population. If a Scottish only body was formed there would have to be

a negotiation on the amount of funding it received. An alternative scenario is that a UK cross-border body is formed that would continue as presently with funding from Scotland. The REF is presently administered by all four funding councils so in theory could continue to be funded by them as cross-border development. However, UCU questions the need to spend vast amounts of money on something that would be a vanity project if Scotland does not use the REF to decide research funding formulaically. Research investment should be maintained to ensure Scotland's leading position in the UK and to support uniquely Scottish research.

Commercialisation

Spend on Scottish Business Enterprise Research and Development, BERD, as a proportion of GDP is half of that for the UK as a whole and is much less than most of our competitor nations. Further, this expenditure has failed to increase over the last decade. Hence in Scotland there is a very low base of BERD which makes it difficult to build links between researchers based in universities and those in industry. UCU believes it will be impossible to grow a knowledge economy without a significant improvement in industrial research spending.

Labour markets and collective bargaining

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 operates 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, 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. Academic and related staff in pre-92 institutions in Scotland are members of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS). 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.



Immigration

Higher education is an international enterprise, depending on the free movement of staff and students. The introduction of the UK points-based immigration system is damaging international engagement, to very little purpose. 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 could be reintroduced whereby graduates get a two-year work visa. This was pioneered in Scotland before becoming UK-wide and then removed across the UK by the present administration. We recommend that the Scottish Government removes immigration caps and reinstates the Fresh Talent Initiative.

Conclusion

All the mainstream political parties have expressed their backing for Scotland's world-class universities and have acknowledged their importance for the future of Scotland. Our call in this referendum campaign is for this backing to be matched by the commitment, however challenging the times, to work with us to secure public acceptance of the need for a renewed consensus that higher education must be better funded, substantially publicly, and accessible to all with the ability to benefit from it. We want to work with a government committed to putting the universities, and above all their teaching and research staff, at the centre of Scotland's civil society, its commercial life, its worldwide reputation and the health and wellbeing of its citizens.