Dear [Member of Parliament],

I am writing as a constituent and trade union member currently working in a small post 92 university, York St John University. Due to a rise in employer contributions to the Teachers’ Pension Scheme, a number of post-92 universities are considering leaving the Teachers’ Pension Scheme. My university is making people redundant this summer because it claims that the institution cannot cover operating costs. The Chief Operating Officer has gone on record by publishing an academic paper last year advocating for universities to be released from obligations imposed by national pay negotiations, and for universities to be allowed to keep staff numbers to what I believe to be unsustainably low numbers, pay their staff less, effectively transform small post-92 universities into providers of degree apprenticeships in the style of FE Colleges who offer degree provision. This change effectively removes the benefits of Higher Education from working class students of today and tomorrow. The YSJ Chief Operating Officer is also suggesting that universities launch their own pension schemes to keep pension costs lower and to expand the number of staff on non-standard and casualised contracts (Hickey 2023). I detail this grim vision because these regressive moves are reflected in the move by Universities UK (UUK) who have written to the government requesting that institutions be allowed to leave the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (TPS), of which 58,000 university staff are members.

Employers withdrawing from TPS would further compound the two-tier higher education system in the UK, heightening existing inequalities between pre and post-1992 institutions. Lecturers at post-92 institutions would be unable to access the same scheme as schoolteachers and college lecturers, making it much harder for post-92 universities to attract and retain the staff they need.

Employers are asking for the flexibility to leave the scheme because the British government is refusing to provide additional funding for universities to cover increased TPS contributions, despite doing so for schools and colleges. Failing to cover the costs in higher education will put further financial stress on an already-struggling sector, resulting in job cuts, course closures, and worsening conditions for staff at universities across the country.

It will be a disaster for our higher education sector if the Department for Education (DfE) continues its refusal to fund the TPS cost increases. Invoking the nominal autonomy of universities, as the DfE has so far done, is no excuse. Especially as the reason for the increase in employer contributions is a policy choice by the government, putting some higher education providers in a position where they will only be able to afford decent pensions for staff by making deep cuts to education provision.

Post-92 universities do enormously important work in bringing under-represented and low participation groups into higher learning, including mature students, black students, working class students, and those who are the first in their families to attend university.

Furthermore, any large scale opt out of TPS would impact on the scheme as a whole and would be detrimental for all members of the Teachers' Pension Scheme.

As my constituency MP, I urge you to support staff and the higher education sector as a whole and sign this EDM which calls on the Department for Education to provide additional funding for universities as they are already doing for schools and further education colleges:

https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/62032

I would also be grateful if you could write to Luke Hall and Gillian Keegan to outline my concerns and call on them to seriously consider additional support to safeguard post-92 universities and staff pensions.

Yours,

[Your name]

[ Your job title]

York St John University

Paper referred to above:

Hickey, R. (2023). Financial sustainability in a marketised and partially autonomous environment: the case of small new public universities in England. Oxford Review of Education, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2229246