Universities Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Finance Committee’s Stage 1 consideration of this Bill.

Higher education institutions are major contributors to the aims of efficiency, effectiveness and economy in the exercise of public functions, and we have made substantial contributions to Scottish Government targets in this area. Universities have also pursued major institutional change when this has been desirable for reasons including efficiency, effectiveness and economy, of which the recent creation of the University of the West of Scotland from the merger of Bell College with the University of Paisley is the latest example.

Universities do, however, exist in a quite specific statutory framework of governance which has developed over the centuries to reflect their status as autonomous institutions whose independence from Ministers is a safeguard to academic freedom and is part of a governance model which has enabled universities to build national and international relationships and to pursue educational and entrepreneurial initiatives and opportunities.

We had some concern when the Bill was published that it gave scope for the Scottish Ministers to apply to universities the wide range of interventions set out in section 10, in a way which would be inconsistent with universities’ autonomous status. Our concerns have been substantially addressed in the attached correspondence with Scottish Government officials. We welcome in particular the confirmation that the Scottish Government has no policy intention to include universities among the bodies to which section 10 applies.

Our comments should be understood as being offered within the context of Universities Scotland’s support for the objectives of the Bill, and of the continuing commitment of Scotland’s universities to working closely with the Scottish Government to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public resources.

Alastair Sim
Director