

## CROSS PARTY GROUP (CPG) ON SCOTLAND'S UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

12.30-14.00 on Thursday 3 December 2015, Committee Room 4, Scottish Parliament

### Note of Meeting

#### Present:

Elizabeth Smith MSP	Scottish Parliament	CPG Convener
Nanette Milne MSP	Scottish Parliament	
Hanzala Malik MSP	Scottish Parliament	
Robin Ashton	Glasgow Kelvin College	
Joanne Buchan	Colleges Scotland	
Kirsty Conlon	Universities Scotland	
Neil Cowie	North East Scotland College	
Neil Croll	University of Glasgow	
Sir Andrew Cubie	Leadership Foundation for Higher Education	
Karen Cullen	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	
Lynne Currie	NUS Scotland	
Rebecca Gaukroger	University of Edinburgh	
Moira Gibson	University of Edinburgh	
Rob Henthorn	NUS Scotland	
Grant Jarvie	University of Edinburgh	
Finlay MacCorquodale	Edinburgh Napier University	
Matthew MacIver	University of the Highlands and Islands	
Rebecca Scarlett	Lead Scotland	
Jane Scott	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	
Alastair Sim	Universities Scotland	
Linda Somerville	NUS Scotland	
Sophie Walker	Scottish Parliament	
James Wilson	Universities Scotland	
Andy Witty	Colleges Scotland	
Douglas Chalmers	UCUS Scotland	

#### Apologies:

Peter Aitchison	University of Glasgow
Iain Gray MSP	Scottish Parliament
Susannah Lane	Universities Scotland
Dr Judith McClure	SCEN
Stewart Maxwell MSP	Scottish Parliament
Heather Sloan	Universities Scotland

## **1. Welcome and Introduction from the Convenor**

The Convenor, welcomed everyone to the twenty-third meeting of the Cross Party Group (CPG). The Convenor thanked Joanne Buchan and Colleges Scotland for sponsoring the lunch for the meeting.

## **2. Apologies**

Apologies were noted.

## **3. Introduction to the topic ‘Does the current school exam/qualifications system meet the needs for college/university admissions?’**

The Convenor noted that many members of the Group had expressed an interest in the topic to be discussed at the meeting. The Convenor said the hope is to gain an understanding of whether the current exam system in Scotland is appropriate and the right one for the future. The Convenor then introduced the speakers to the Group.

### **Sir Andrew Cubie, Chair of the Board, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, and Independent Chair of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Partnership Board**

Sir Andrew said he is enthusiastic about the topic and welcomed the opportunity to present to the Group. Sir Andrew said the purpose of the education process to develop the potential and capacity of every Scot. We have a duty to deliver this to all those who have the ability to learn. Sir Andrew said that everyone’s learning needs differ; and the individual learner is at the centre of everything.

Sir Andrew described a gap year as part of a continuum of opportunities from the early to later years. Scotland is at the beginning of a process of recognition of experience beyond curricular activities. Society in Scotland is dependent on individuals with broad, rounded experience. Sir Andrew praised the sabbatical programme at George Watson School, which allows for experienced teachers to experience a gap period. Sir Andrew also praised other schemes such the Children’s University.

Sir Andrew said that gap years need not be abroad, for the elite, or costly. The International Citizen Service (ICS) offers opportunities for 18-25-year-olds to volunteer abroad for three months. The idea emanated from the UK Prime Minister to deal with the ‘Big Society’ around the world. The volunteering scheme is like the Peace Core. Learners contribute to the development goals of the countries in which they are volunteering. The proposition is for the 18-25-year-olds to have an experience twinned with individuals in the country and to work with them on projects. So far, 1,500 Scots have taken part and it is available to all who want to take part. However, only a certain number can take part. Sir Andrew said there is no reason why we cannot be more vigorous in our encouragement to more young Scots to take up these opportunities before taking up formal learning progression opportunities.

Sir Andrew told the Group that the moment all sorts of young people are looking to employers for experience, and that there is a need to have employer support to expand experience opportunities. Employers could work to produce a form of gap year activity that does not exist at the moment. Sir Andrew argued that whatever activity is undertaken should be incorporated by the SCQF – and a reference would be helpful.

Sir Andrew concluded by arguing that a number of existing opportunities are based overseas, so there is a need to develop more in Scotland. The perception is that gap years are for the affluent young, so there is a need to change learners' thinking. It is possible to achieve both.

**Dr Neil Croll, Head of Widening Participation, University of Glasgow**

Dr Croll said the topic question is an important one at the University of Glasgow where the institution looks to understand what most accurately shows student ability. Dr Croll said the University has researched student retention and found that student attainment pre-entry does lead to success at university. Dr Croll said the current system does work well.

Dr Croll told the Group that a level of support can be given to students on courses, but there is only so far you can go with that. The Group heard that non-academic qualifications and experience can be more important for vocational degrees, so the university will look at experiences as these can suggest a certain aptitude.

Dr Croll explained that the University does use personal statements to glean special/exceptional circumstances of applicants. Institutions do exercise some caution, however, as quality of experiences can be coloured by the applicant's status or background. Academic attainment is always paramount. The University operates a contextualised admissions process when considering applicants' educational backgrounds. Workshops and other programmes are available to bridge the gap between high and low progression schools, too. The University can adjust grade requirements by performance of candidates on pre-entry programmes. These programmes offer an alternative means to enable students from widening participation backgrounds to access university and an additional opportunity to show their academic potential. Research has shown that students who have used bridging or top up programmes do as well as, or better than, students from wealthier backgrounds.

On non-academic qualifications, Dr Croll said the University is open to considering wider achievement. However, there are a number of issues that need to be considered. One such issue is how do you measure that achievement? There would need to be a standardised way of looking at this. Dr Croll suggested that those who meet academic talent needed to enter university by the end of S5 could benefit from a year out. However, those who need to use S6 to achieve the entry tariff or adjusted tariff would miss out on these opportunities (and would miss out on university entry without S6). At the University of Glasgow, only 10-15 per cent of intake comes from S5 as most applicants want to stay on for S6. Applicants feel that S6 prepares them well; it makes them closer to the average age group of the overall cohort from the rest of the UK, Europe and overseas; and it is good for confidence. Taking a gap between school and university study raises continuation problems

for learners as the gap can mean a loss of momentum. Adult returners, for example, face issues when re-entering higher education.

Dr Croll concluded by telling the Group that the current system works well and we have a system where contextualised admissions works fairly for all applications. Dr Croll told the Group that universities still need to see applicants' academic achievements.

### **Robin Ashton, Director of Curriculum, Glasgow Kelvin College**

Mr Ashton explained to the Group that colleges usually look at what qualifications applicants hold because of the range of courses on offer at institutions and the number of students who apply with varied experience. Usually, colleges look for successful study at the SCQF level below that for the course the applicant is applying to for entry.

Mr Ashton said that his experience is that colleges interview all applicants and that it is rare that places are given without interview as this stage allows assessment of all experiences. Colleges look for core and wider skills and do take account of other experiences outside of formal learning opportunities.

Mr Ashton explained that the paradigm of college entry is based on the model we work to now, which sees students progress from school through to college and then on to university in a continuum. The SCQF underpins this. Mr Ashton argued that, in the current system, school programmes will often include college learning and the university curriculum will often include part of colleges' higher education offering. This offers students a wider set of progression pathways.

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is a good fit for colleges' learning and assessment approach as it matches up with the approach in schools. Mr Ashton said the Scottish Government's youth employment strategy looks for colleges to expand options for school pupils, including offering relevant work-based learning opportunities. Colleges are reconfiguring the curriculum so that it leads to pathways into work for learners. There is a need to ask where are courses leading to for students and what choices are open to them. The Commission on Widening Access is again about offering a wider range of options, so schools, colleges and universities need to work together.

Mr Ashton concluded by saying that the school curriculum should include vocational options for pupils and that school achievements should include portfolio achievements as well as qualifications. This would open up pathways to some students that they find are currently closed to them. Mr Ashton raised a final question for the Group to consider, which is how do we get colleges and universities to work together, along with schools and employers, to give vocational and academic study equal value?

## **4. Discussion**

The Group participated in a lively discussion on issues including on whether there is a problem with the sixth year in Scotland's schools and how we make the year more valuable to students; on

whether more college and university places are needed in Scotland to avoid student disappointment; on the value of personal statements in the admissions process; and the need to tackle attainment gaps in play before young people start school in order to encourage greater social mobility in Scotland.

#### **5. Date and topic of next meeting**

The Convener advised the Group that the CPG will next meet in 2016. A date and time would be circulated in the New Year.

The Convener welcomed suggestions for future meeting topics from Group members.

The Convenor thanked all of the speakers and attendees for their contributions.

**Meeting closed.**