

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

13.00 – 14.00 on Thursday 21 March 2019, Committee Room 2, Scottish Parliament

Topic: Managing the impact of Brexit

Note of Meeting

Present:

Ms Elizabeth Smith MSP (Convener)	Scottish Parliament
Mr Iain Gray MSP (Vice Convener)	Scottish Parliament
Mr Tim Bedford	University of Strathclyde
Mr Barry Black	Scottish Parliament
Mr Terry Brotherstone	University of Aberdeen
Mr Godfrey Brown	University of Aberdeen
Ms Caroline Bysh	SRUC
Mr Matt Francis	University of Stirling
Mr Robbie Francis	Thorntons Law
Mr Tom Hall	Colleges Scotland
Mr Christopher Kennedy	Unite the Union
Ms Sarah Kirkpatrick	Scottish Funding Council
Dr Finlay MacCorquodale	Edinburgh Napier University
Mr Alan Mackay	University of Edinburgh
Ms Seonag Mackinnon	Glasgow Caledonian University
Ms Alison Malcolm	Scottish Funding Council
Mr Keith McAllister	South Lanarkshire College
Mr Drew McGowan	West College Scotland
Ms Louise McGurk	UCU Scotland
Ms Danielle O'Donnell	Robert Gordon University
Ms Lynne Raeside	Scottish Funding Council
Ms Vonnie Sandlan	Scottish Funding Council
Mr Andy Witty	Colleges Scotland

Mr Duncan McKay	Universities Scotland
Mr Boab Thomson	Universities Scotland

Apologies:

Ms Joanne Buchan	Colleges Scotland
Dr Sandra Cairncross	Edinburgh Napier University
Ms Jenny Gilruth MSP	Scottish Parliament
Prof Matthew Maciver	University of the Highlands and Islands
Ms Jane Scott	Queen Margaret University
Mr Alastair Sim	Universities Scotland
Mr Martyn Spence	Heriot-Watt University
Mr Kenny Stewart	The Open University in Scotland

1. Welcome and introduction from the Convener

The Convener welcomed members to the eleventh meeting of the CPG on Colleges and Universities in session five of the Scottish Parliament. The topic for discussion is how institutions are managing the impact of Brexit. The Convener welcomed the speakers: Mr Andy Witty, Director of Sector Policy, Colleges Scotland; Mr Keith McAllister, Head of Finance, South Lanarkshire College; Ms Vonnie Sandlan, Assistant Director EU Exit, Scottish Funding Council; Mr Alan Mackay, Deputy Vice-Principal International, University of Edinburgh; and Professor Tim Bedford, Associate Principal, Research and Knowledge Exchange, University of Strathclyde.

2. Apologies

The Convener noted the apologies for the meeting.

3. Approval of minutes from 6 December 2018 meeting.

Members of the group approved the minutes from the previous meeting on 6 December 2018

4. Introduction of topic: Managing the impact of Brexit.

The Convener then invited the speakers to make their presentations.

Mr Andy Witty, Colleges Scotland & Mr Keith McAllister, South Lanarkshire College

Mr Witty and Mr McAllister began by informing members that their presentation would focus on how Brexit might affect the college sector in Scotland. They added that the speed of change is such that it makes sector-wide policy interventions very difficult.

Continuing, Mr Witty told members that an estimated 3% of staff in colleges are from the EU whilst over 16,000 EU students are currently enrolled in colleges in Scotland. One college in particular, Edinburgh College, delivers over 40,000 credits annually to students from the EU. Mr Witty added that staff and student mobility was key for college sector and more work was needed to ensure EU domiciles could work and study in Scotland.

Mr McAllister then explained if there is a drop in the number of students from the EU going to university, this will also have a secondary impact on people going to colleges. He added that there is a strong need for the Scottish Government to set a strategic approach on how colleges and universities should work together so there is no unhelpful competition for students.

The presentation concluded with Mr McAllister stating that with the right support, colleges could make a significant contribution a post-Brexit Scotland. He added that any of the Brexit scenarios could result in an economic shock, and colleges will be ready to address any skills gaps which might arise from this.

Ms Vonnie Sandlan, Scottish Funding Council

Ms Sandlan began by stating that the Erasmus programme has been an important initiative for thousands of students across Scotland over the years. In considering the college sector, Ms Sandlan added that there is currently €9.5m worth of activity in Scotland alone. There's a general consensus that Erasmus is just for university students, but that's incorrect. College students have much to gain from the programme, especially given that there will be a significant number of them who have never left the town where they were born, never mind the country.

Ms Sandlan then told the story of City of Glasgow College student Mark Gibson, who was selected to go to Finland and complete a work placement as part of his HNC in Childhood Practice. The trip was fully funded through Erasmus and it gave Mark the opportunity to see one of the top childcare systems in the world and exposed him to a different way of delivering early years education. As well as contributing Mark's total requirement of work placement for the year, Ms Sandlan added that the experience had a significant, positive impact on Mark as a person and transformed his approach to learning.

Ms Sandlan concluded her presentation by discussing the UK's future participation in the Erasmus programme. She informed members that in a no-deal scenario, it is expected that the UK will lose its 'Programme Country' status and will be reclassified as a partner country. In this case, there is no precedent for a partner country to participate in any Erasmus activity beyond certain HE activity. This would exclude colleges, but also youth clubs and volunteering organisations, from participating in the programme. Ms Sandlan added that although this was the worst-case scenario, it was still a likely outcome.

Mr Alan Mackay, Deputy Vice-Principal International, University of Edinburgh and Director of Edinburgh Global

Mr Mackay started by informing members that he would focus on the human impact of Brexit. Quite a lot of the conversation is given to official statistics about employment and immigration, but first and foremost, this is about people. How Brexit will affect, and is affecting, ordinary people's lives should be the number one priority for governments.

At his own institution, Mr Mackay said staff and students are feeling anxious, alienated and confused. Currently, there are 6440 staff and students from the EU at the University of Edinburgh. 14% of students are EU-domiciled whilst a quarter of the academic workforce are from Europe. Their experience has been absent from the public discussion over the last three years and a worrying anti-immigrant rhetoric has surfaced. He added that Scotland needs to send out a welcoming message to EU citizens and has welcomed the Scottish Government's efforts in this regard.

Continuing, Mr Mackay then moved on to discuss Erasmus, stating that a number of students were anxious over whether they would still be able to participate in the programme. Edinburgh University is the largest participation institution in the UK and the largest host university also. Mr Mackay added that his institution has taken the decision to provide a financial guarantee to students waiting to start their time abroad so that they will still be able to do so.

Mr Mackay then expanded on other areas of concern for students, notably the fact that EU students currently do not know their fee status for next year. He added that the Scottish Government haven't given a commitment yet and that it was starting to cause some anxiety amongst students. Fee status also has implications for access to student loans, so it's important that a decision is taken soon. Mr Mackay finished his presentation by saying that whilst his institution is doing everything it can for its staff and students, the current uncertainty over Brexit is nonetheless a political issue which must be solved by politicians.

Professor Tim Bedford, Associate Principal, Research and Knowledge Exchange, University of Strathclyde

Professor Bedford began his presentation by informing members that there has been only a slight decline in UK participation in Horizon research programmes over the last couple of years. However, he added that there has been a greater decline in the number of grants in which UK institutions are coordinators, which suggests European partners have become nervous about partnering with a UK institution.

Currently, EU funding sources contribute over £100m to Scotland's research excellence every year, which is around 10% of total research income. However, Professor Bedford added that in addition to funding, participation in European research programmes also gives institutions access to collaborative networks, expertise and facilities. These are just as important as the actual funding in some cases, he added.

Professor Bedford then informed members about his own institution's participation in Horizon 2020, the EU's biggest research and innovation programme. The University of Strathclyde received £36m last year in funding and were coordinators of 22% of the total number of projects in Scotland. He added that there was a varying dependency on EU funding amongst different academic departments, but some were significantly reliant on European monies. For example, Professor Bedford said the university's European Policies Research Centre, which specialises in regional and industrial development in Europe, received 80% of its total funding from the EU.

In concluding, Professor Bedford summarised the different outcomes which could occur as the UK prepares to leave the EU. If the UK leaves with a deal, the UK will be an associated country in regards to European research programmes, which means the status quo would prevail for the duration of the current programmes. However, if there is no-deal, the UK would become a third country and this would result in institutions losing access to EU research funding. In finishing, Professor Bedford said

the UK Government now needed to focus on how it intends to support projects which are reliant on funding from EU programmes.

5. Discussion and questions.

Louise McGurk, UCU Scotland

Ms McGurk asked the speakers if there had been any calculations of potential job losses in colleges and universities as a result of a decline in EU staff and students coming to work and study in Scotland.

Mr Witty said he was not aware of the national picture as redundancies are a decision for individual colleges, adding that since colleges are in the public sector they do not have involuntary redundancies. He finished by saying colleges are essential for equipping the workforce with skills for the future so he believes there will still be an appetite for further education.

Ms Sandlan agreed with Mr Witty, saying job losses were calculated on an institution-by-institution basis. On the future skills needs of Scotland, Ms Sandlan said the tertiary education sector will play a crucial role. She added that the contribution of further education and higher education would help the economy recover in a no-deal scenario.

Christopher Kennedy, Unite the Union

Mr Kennedy also asked about potential job losses resulting from a no-deal exit from the EU, focusing on technical and operational staff in colleges and universities. He said roles such as these are easier to cut than academic staff, but more difficult to replace. He also noted the high salary threshold in the immigration white paper also discriminated against staff in these roles.

Ms Sandlan emphasised that the white paper is exactly that; a white paper. It is subject to a lengthy consultation period in which there will be time to engage with policymakers. She encouraged members of the group to engage in this process, both on an individual and institutional-level.

6. Dates and agreement of topics for future meetings in the next parliamentary year.

The Convener informed members that the next meeting of the group would be held on Thursday 20 June and encouraged members to suggest topics for discussion for future meeting.

7. Close.

The Convener closed the meeting and thanked members for attending.