

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

13.00 – 14.00 on Thursday 5 March 2020, Committee Room 6, Scottish Parliament

Topic: Apprenticeships

Note of Meeting

Present:

Ms	Liz	Smith MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Iain	Gray MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Jeremy	Balfour MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Alastair	Ballantyne	Scottish Funding Council
Mr	Andrew	Cathro	Dundee and Angus College
Ms	Sarah	Chalmers	University of Edinburgh
Ms	Pam	Crawford	University of Stirling
Ms	Lynne	Currie	Universities Scotland
Ms	Anne	Farquharson	The Open University in Scotland
Mr	Robbie	Francis	Thorntons
Prof	Blair	Grubb	University of Dundee
Mr	Tom	Hall	Colleges Scotland
Mr	Graeme	Hendry	Skills Development Scotland
Mr	Derek	Hutchison	University of Strathclyde
Mr	Ben	Kinross	sparqs
Prof	Matthew	Maclver	University of the Highlands and Islands
Mr	Liam	McCabe	NUS Scotland
Mr	Mark	McCahill	Colleges Scotland
Ms	Agnes	Mullen	Church of Scotland
Ms	Lynne	Raeside	Scottish Funding Council
Ms	Carol	Ramsay	University of Edinburgh
Ms	Frances	Ratcliffe	Fife Council
Mr	Grant	Ritchie	Dundee and Angus College
Mr	Alastair	Sim	Universities Scotland
Ms	Emma	Slavin	Skills Development Scotland
Prof	Sally	Smith	Edinburgh Napier University
Ms	Julie	Strachan	Robert Gordon University
Ms	Risga	Summers	NUS Scotland
Mr	Boab	Thomson	Universities Scotland
Mr	Justin	Walker	sparqs

Apologies:

Ms	Rowena	Pelik	QAA
Ms	Fiona	Larg	University of the Highlands and Islands
Dr	John	Blicharski	University of Dundee

Mr	Oliver	Mundell MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Paul	Little	City of Glasgow College
Ms	Fiona	Diggle	Audit Scotland
Ms	Joanne	Buchan	Colleges Scotland
Mr	Drew	McGowan	West College Scotland

1. Welcome and introduction from the Convener

The Convener welcomed members to the fourteenth meeting of the CPG on Colleges and Universities in session five of the Scottish Parliament. The Convener thanked Mr Gray for chairing the previous meeting on 5 December 2019 and reminded members that the meeting was the group's AGM where the office bearers were re-elected to their roles.

The Convener thanked Skills Development Scotland for sponsoring lunch.

2. Apologies

The Convener noted the apologies for the meeting.

3. Approval of minute from 5 December 2019 meeting

Members approved the minute of the last meeting.

4. Introduction of topic: apprenticeships

The Convener noted that the meeting coincides with Scottish Apprenticeship Week and invited the speakers to make their contributions.

Ms Frances Ratcliffe, Fife Council

Ms Ratcliffe began her presentation by informing members that she leads Fife Council's Graduate Apprenticeship programme and is a Consultant Engineer with the Council's Roads and Transportation Service. Although the Council already provided apprenticeships in disciplines such as administration and plumbing, Ms Ratcliffe told members that she became aware of Graduate Apprenticeships in 2017 after attending an event at the University of Dundee. The following year, Fife Council decided to introduce a GA in Civil Engineering, partly in response to the ageing workforce of its Roads and Transportation Service. Following a brief selection process, Ms Ratcliffe told members that the University of Dundee was chosen as the partner institution. Since then, the Council has enjoyed a close partnership with the institution.

Discussing the value of apprentices to her organisation, Ms Ratcliffe said that apprentices allow the Council to fill posts that may otherwise be difficult to recruit due to skills shortages. While they are undertaking their studies, apprentices are providing a valuable service and by the time they have completed their studies, they've not only achieved the required academic qualifications but have experience in practice too.

Continuing, she added that Graduate Apprenticeships allow the Council to provide routes into further and higher education for individuals whose personal circumstances may not have allowed

them to enter full time education. Even those apprentices who are unable to secure employment at the end of their apprenticeship still gain valuable experience from their time with the Council and are able to develop skills and experience that will improve their future job prospects.

Mr Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland

Mr Sim began by providing an overview of the Graduate Apprenticeship landscape in Scotland and told members that there are currently 14 frameworks across a variety of subject areas, from Accounting to Data Science. A total of 12 higher education institutions are partners in the delivery of Graduate Apprenticeships and there were 1300 enrolments in the current academic year. Since the route was launched in 2017, enrolments have increased year-on-year.

Discussing the benefits of Graduate Apprenticeships, Mr Sim said that learning while earning is obviously advantageous for learners, adding that the opportunity to develop skills which are sought-after by industry is as equally important. Continuing, Mr Sim said the route was just as beneficial for universities as it allows institutions to deepen their engagement with businesses and to broaden the range of employers that they work with.

Mr Sim then informed members that the Graduate Apprenticeship route is more popular amongst mature learners. In the current academic year, 82% of apprentices were over the age of 20. He added that the majority are already partway into their careers and are looking to upskill.

In terms of enhancements which would make the route even more valuable and attractive to learners, businesses and universities, Mr Sim said the sector would like to see the range of subjects offered widened, adding that the 14 disciplines currently offered is quite limited. Moving on to discuss funding, Mr Sim informed members that institutions find the short-term commitments from SDS problematic as they're unable to plan for the future. He added that this is exacerbated by the fact that institutions often have to operate within fairly short timescales to develop programmes.

Concluding, Mr Sim said there was some uncertainty over how Graduate Apprenticeships will be funded post-Brexit and informed members that 2019 Graduate Apprenticeship starters will be supported with a total of £12.6m from the European Social Fund over the course of their studies. Given the UK's departure from the EU, access to this funding stream will be lost. Mr Sim suggested that the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund and the Apprenticeship Levy monies could help support the Graduate Apprenticeship route in the future.

Graeme Hendry, Skills Development Scotland

Mr Hendry's presentation focused on Foundation Apprenticeships and he began by emphasising the growing demand for the route: enrolments are up from around 1500 learners last year to around 3450 this academic year. He added that the route was established five years ago and was designed to be part of a broad senior phase education. The original vision for the route was to support learners into either further training and education and to create pathways for employer engagement.

Mr Hendry then informed members that there are currently 12 Frameworks operating, in subject areas such ranging from Engineering to IT Services. He added that of the 12, seven are STEM-related. Each supports a pathway into a critical occupation and all are designed in the context of the needs of employers and the economy. He added that SDS runs learner and employer feedback surveys as a way of enhancement and that the results are overwhelmingly positive with 91% of respondents recommending the route.

Moving on to discuss progression pathways, Mr Hendry said the route is a preferred qualification for Graduate Apprenticeship recruitment and is recognised within eligibility criteria for every college and university in Scotland. He added that in relation to UCAS tariffs, Foundation Apprenticeships attract scores in excess of Highers, ranging from 42-56, compared to 33 points for an A at Higher-level.

Concluding his presentation, Mr Hendry said there is increasing flexibility in the ways in which Foundation Apprenticeships are being delivered. Online delivery is increasing year-on-year, and there is increasing joint delivery with schools. He added that around 90% of schools in Scotland have pupils involved in Foundation Apprenticeships in some shape or form.

Grant Ritchie, Dundee and Angus College

Mr Ritchie began his presentation by informing members that there are currently 11,567 college students undertaking a Modern Apprenticeship, up from 11,108 last year. However, Mr Ritchie said that full-time college numbers are dropping because more pupils are staying on longer at school and universities are accepting more students they otherwise wouldn't have due to reduced entry requirements. Therefore, the college sector sees apprenticeships as a way to keep colleges alive as their learner pool reduces.

Moving on to discuss Foundation Apprenticeships, Mr Ritchie said there has been an explosion in demand for the route. In his institution alone the number of learners undertaking a Foundation Apprenticeship has increased from 50 to 270. Mr Ritchie attributes this rise partly to the promotion of the programme through his open sessions which allows parents and prospective students to learn about the Foundation Apprenticeship route and ask questions about the opportunities the qualification can bring.

Mr Ritchie then referred to a point made earlier by Mr Sim that Scotland is largely a SME economy and said that smaller companies often do not have the resource to take on apprentices. To get round this, Dundee and Angus College have partnered with the Shared Apprenticeship Scheme, the first of its kind in Scotland. Unlike other apprenticeships, the scheme covers the cost of the apprentices during their time at college with employers only needing to cover their wages whilst the apprentice is on site. Mr Ritchie added that this unique set up not only gives small and medium sized employers the opportunity to take on apprentices, but it also helps to combat youth unemployment by providing young people a direct line to work. Concluding, Mr Ritchie informed members that Dundee and Angus now has 50 apprentices active in the scheme.

5. Discussion and questions

The Convener thanked the speakers for their presentations and invited questions from the group.

Liam McCabe, NUS Scotland

Mr McCabe referred to a recent survey of apprentice pay which found that 1 in 5 apprentices are not earning the Minimum Wage and that protections for apprentices are not in place. He added that Scottish apprentices are not as protected as their counterparts in the rest of the UK and that a significant portion of apprentices' income is used on travel.

Mr Ritchie replied that whenever his institution engages with apprenticeships, they start by talking with the major trade bodies who control apprenticeships. He added that every college in Scotland is

a National Living Wage employer but agreed that there is an element of private sector practice around apprenticeships.

Jeremy Balfour MSP, Scottish Parliament

Mr Balfour said the apprenticeship route is quite a niche market at the moment and asked if universities would welcome an increase in demand for Graduate Apprenticeships.

Mr Sim replied that universities are certainly open to an expansion of Graduate Apprenticeships but that there is a question around sustainability of funding. If the expansion is funded from the same monies as undergraduate places, then this would reduce the number of undergraduate courses offered by universities. Mr Sim added that there was already a huge unmet demand from qualified school leavers so whilst the sector would welcome an expansion of Graduate Apprenticeships, the route must expand without reducing universities' ability to recruit undergraduates.

Prof Matthew Maclver, University of the Highlands and Islands

Prof Maclver raised online learning and said that for UHI and many of its students, online delivery is the norm. He added that the method is being used more by employers and the partner colleges and delivers courses in a way that is interesting and looking to the future.

Mr Hendry replied that he has sat in an online learning session with Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar and found it to be a very positive experience. He added that SDS would like to see this method of learning expand and commended UHI and Robert Gordon University for leading the way with Graduate Apprenticeships.

Iain Gray MSP, Scottish Parliament

Mr Gray asked whether Graduate Apprenticeship numbers are capped and asked for an estimate of the number of places which would be on offer in the next academic year.

Mr Sim replied that Graduate Apprenticeship places are capped as funding comes from European Structural and Investment Funds, which are then passed to SDS. He added that SDS effectively meet the cost of teaching involved in Graduate Apprenticeships.

Mr Hendry responded by saying that SDS are still in discussion with the Scottish Government about funding for the next academic year.

Anne Farquharson, The Open University in Scotland

Ms Farquharson reiterated Mr Sim's previous remarks regarding the uptake of apprenticeships amongst SMEs and said part of the problem is flexibility, adding that a modular apprenticeship model might be suit smaller companies better. She also commented that the current structure is geared towards full-time students whilst most of her institution's students are part-time and said she would welcome an apprenticeship model which is focused less on a fixed period.

6. Dates of future meetings in the next parliamentary year.

The Convener noted the date of the next meeting as Thursday 11 June 2020.

7. Close

The Convener closed the meeting and thanked members for attending.