

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

10.00 – 11.00 on Thursday 12 November 2020, Zoom

Topic: **COVID-19 recovery: upskilling and reskilling through flexible learning**

Note of Meeting

Present:

Ms	Clare	Adamson MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Iain	Gray MSP	Scottish Parliament
Ms	Liz	Smith MSP	Scottish Parliament
Ms	Donella	Beaton	Robert Gordon University
Mr	John	Blicharski	University of Dundee
Mr	Terry	Brotherstone	University of Aberdeen
Ms	Joanne	Buchan	Colleges Scotland
Mr	Andy	Cathro	Dundee and Angus College
Ms	Sarah	Chalmers	University of Edinburgh
Ms	Izzy	Crawford	Robert Gordon University
Mr	Neil	Croll	University of Glasgow
Ms	Emily	Devlin	Robert Gordon University
Ms	Sharon	Drysdale	Scottish Funding Council
Mr	John	Erskine	Scottish Parliament
Ms	Jane	Ferguson	The Open University in Scotland
Ms	Jackie	Galbraith	West Lothian College
Mr	Iain	Gray MSP	Scottish Parliament
Prof	Blair	Grubb	University of Dundee
Mr	Tom	Hall	Colleges Scotland
Mr	James	Harrison	QAA Scotland
Mr	Graeme	Hendry	Skills Development Scotland
Ms	Marie	Hendry	The Open University in Scotland
Mr	Grant	Jarvie	University of Edinburgh
Ms	Vallath	Kavitha Krishnan	Robert Gordon University
Ms	Aoife	Keenan	Universities Scotland
Mr	Christopher	Kennedy	Unite the Union
Ms	Susan	Kerr	Heriot-Watt University
Ms	Susannah	Lane	Universities Scotland
Ms	Fiona	Larg	University of the Highlands and Islands
Prof	Matthew	Maclver	University of the Highlands and Islands
Ms	Katie	Mackie	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Murdo	Mathison	UCU Scotland
Mr	Sean	McGivern	University of Glasgow
Mr	Drew	McGowan	West College Scotland
Ms	Erin	McKee	University of Glasgow
Prof	Chris	O'Neil	Inverness College UHI
Ms	Shona	Paul	Glasgow School of Art
Ms	Ulrike	Peter	Universities Scotland

Ms	Suzy	Powell	Interface
Ms	Lynne	Raeside	Scottish Funding Council
Ms	Rebecca	Scarlett	LEAD
Ms	Jane	Scott	Queen Margaret University
Mr	Alastair	Sim	Universities Scotland
Ms	Emma	Slavin	Skills Development Scotland
Ms	Susan	Szymborski	University of the Highlands and Islands
Mr	Boab	Thomson	Universities Scotland
Ms	Elaine	Wilson	University of Glasgow
Mr	Andy	Witty	Colleges Scotland

Apologies:

Ms	Beatrice	Wishart MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Alastair	Delaney	QAA Scotland

1. Welcome and introduction from the current Convener

The Convener welcomed the Group to its first virtual meeting during the pandemic. She indicated that today's topic of the role of colleges and universities in upskilling and reskilling for the recovery was very important and timely as the pandemic is likely to have significant long-term implications for the economy.

The Convener informed members that part of the meeting would be dedicated to the AGM business including the re-election of the office bearers and a review of the group's work over the last year.

2. Apologies

The Convener noted the apologies for the meeting.

3. Annual General Meeting business

Members of the group approved the Annual Return Form.

The Convener declared her intention to seek re-election to the role and was formally nominated by Alastair Sim. Susannah Lane seconded the nomination.

The Vice Convener declared his intention to seek re-election to the role and was formally nominated by Liz Smith MSP. Alastair Sim seconded the nomination.

4. Approval of minutes from 5 March 2020 meeting

Members approved the minute of the previous meeting.

5. Presentations

Ms Donella Beaton, Robert Gordon University

Ms Beaton began her presentation by informing members that the University's Business Development Team had focused its skills provision on the needs of the North East prior to the pandemic and had been looking at micro-credentials as part of this portfolio. During April 2020, Robert Gordon University (RGU) prioritised areas it felt would be most relevant to businesses and individuals and launched courses in strategic leadership, resilience and change management.

Continuing, Ms Beaton said that the University also offers a shorter skills package called *Knowledge Bites for Business*, which is a smaller commitment on the part of participants. Delivered online, there have been over 1,000 participants at 15 events delivered since August 2020.

Graduate apprenticeships are another element of skills delivery at RGU and Ms Beaton informed the group that they have not been as adversely affected by the pandemic as anticipated. Due to high demand, the University is offering a February 2021 start date for Graduate Apprenticeships in Business Management and Data Science, covering subjects such as leadership, management and strategy as well as digital and data analytic skills. Ms Beaton added that these skills are becoming increasingly important as businesses look to the future both during and especially post COVID-19.

Ms Marie Hendry, The Open University in Scotland

Ms Hendry began by stating that as an online provider, the Open University has been very well positioned to deliver during the pandemic. Thankfully, there has been minimal disruption for its 18,000 students. She added that the institution's key focus during the pandemic has been providing supporting to the existing workforce and those on furlough or facing redundancy. This builds on the University's existing experience supporting staff affected by large-scale redundancy programmes pre-pandemic.

Ms Hendry then informed members that there were 25,000 people using the free learning content online in the first week of lockdown which included teachers relying on online resources for their pupils. Since the pandemic, the University has targeted provision towards those working in some of the most adversely affected sectors such as hospitality and tourism. It has seen incredibly high demand including 650 applications for 50 places available on a CISCO micro-credential.

Over the pandemic, the OU has also supported other organisations to take learning online. A fully funded micro-credential was made available to those working in community education as the University sees this as part of its social mission.

Professor Chris O'Neill, Inverness College UHI

Professor O'Neill began by informing members that the Highlands and Islands have been hit disproportionately hard by the pandemic given the region's economic reliance on tourism, hospitality and creative arts. The region rates third highest out of all local authority areas for the percentage of the workforce to be furloughed. Despite that there are some growth sectors in the region, such as forestry and agriculture, and it is these that the College can support with skills needs.

Professor O'Neil explained how "tertiary education" works within the UHI model and advised that it is not only concerned with vertical progression (from an HN qualification to a PhD). It can also allow students to progress diagonally through the matrix so that a plumber trains and qualifies to become an engineer, for example. This offers more options and flexibility to students particularly those already in the workforce.

Concluding, Professor O'Neill said the College initially expected there to be a very negative impact on apprenticeships in terms of company interest and practical considerations to enable them to happen but that hasn't really materialised in many sectors.

Ms Jackie Galbraith, West Lothian College

Ms Gailbraith advised that the West Lothian region has a number of short-term challenges in its labour market but longer-term there are prospects of emerging markets and sectors that the college sector is well placed to support.

Continuing, Ms Galbraith said that colleges deliver short, sharp training to individuals and companies, adding that there is also a role for colleges in ensuring the most disadvantaged are not left behind. She gave the example of a college-led training programme in cyber security for neurodiverse young people.

Moving on to discuss partnerships, Ms Galbraith said West Lothian College works with the local Council as part of its economic recovery plan. She added that the College is exploring partnerships with three other colleges to co-create and co-deliver courses to offer more choice and a greater pace of progression through a qualification. This model might create the opportunity to deliver a Higher National Certificate in 4-6 months rather than a year and so accelerate the student's learner journey.

6. Discussion and questions

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

Iain Gray MSP, Scottish Parliament

Mr Gray remarked that the presentations had been very strong and more needed to be done to ensure that policy makers and the wider public were made aware of the focused support offered by colleges and universities during the pandemic. He also commented that the delivery model of skills as described by both colleges and universities is not what people conventionally think of as further or higher education. He questioned whether the funding model, going forward, needed to be more flexible to support such initiatives. This was raised in the context of the Scottish Funding Council's Sustainability and Coherence Review.

Ms Hendry said that even before the pandemic there was recognition of the importance of lifelong learning. However, the pandemic, and likely subsequent recession, has underlined the need for short and flexible learning as means of reskilling the workforce. Professor O'Neill agreed and added that the funding question will be of particular importance going forward as institutions play a key role in economic recovery.

Professor Blair Grubb, University of Dundee

Professor Grubb asked how institutions are advertising their new reskilling offers and how they intend to evaluate the impact of those offers in terms of getting people into employment.

Ms Beaton said Robert Gordon University has extensive links with industry which can be useful in promoting short courses. In terms of evaluation, Ms Beaton said engaging with learners and employers is absolutely vital in terms of reviewing impact. This engagement allows the institution to understand whether there are skills gap, and if so, how best to fill those.

Mr Chris Kennedy, Unite the Union

Mr Kennedy raised online learning and asked the presenters whether they think institutions will revert to traditional in-person teaching once the pandemic is over.

Professor O'Neill replied that he sees an evolution happening and believes institutions will offer a hybrid model of learning going forward. He added that moving to online learning at the beginning of the pandemic presented challenges but that the experience has been largely positive. He added that UHI had already developed a sophisticated online offering given its geographical spread.

Clare Adamson MSP, Scottish Parliament

Ms Adamson asked whether there is an equalities aspect to flexible learning and whether people from diverse backgrounds face barriers to taking up opportunities.

Ms Galbraith said that colleges and universities collect equality and diversity data at enrolment and that protected characteristics are a part of the Scottish Funding Council's Outcome Agreement targets. Ms Hendry added that part of the Open University's mission is to give everyone a level playing field regardless of their background.

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

The Convener closed the meeting by reflecting that the online format had worked well. It was the Group's intention to hold another, final, meeting before the 2021 Scottish elections and committed to looking for dates in January/February 2021.

8. Close

The Convener closed the meeting and thanked members for attending.