

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

13.00 – 14.00 on Thursday 4 March 2021 via Zoom

Topic: Reflection on the last five years in further and higher education and hopes for colleges and universities in the next Parliament.

Note of Meeting

Present:

Ms	Liz	Smith MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Iain	Gray MSP	Scottish Parliament
Dr	John	Blicharski	University of Dundee
Mr	Terry	Brotherstone	University of Aberdeen
Mr	Matt	Crilly	NUS Scotland
Mr	Neil	Croll	University of Glasgow
Mr	Michael	Cross	City of Glasgow College
Mr	Martin	Fairbairn	Scottish Funding Council
Mr	Matt	Francis	University of Stirling
Mr	Liam	Furby	NUS Scotland
Ms	Yoshiko	Gibo	Audit Scotland
Mr	Iain	Gray MSP	Scottish Parliament
Prof	Blair	Grubb	University of Dundee
Mr	Kenny	Harrison	
Dr	Graham	Kirby	University of St Andrews
Ms	Susannah	Lane	Universities Scotland
Ms	Fiona	Larg	University of the Highlands and Islands
Ms	Veronica	Lynch	Perth College UHI
Prof	Matthew	Maciver	University of the Highlands and Islands
Mr	Murdo	Mathison	UCU Scotland
Ms	Erin	McKee	University of Glasgow
Ms	Suzy	Powell	Interface
Mr	Keith	Robson	The Open University in Scotland
Ms	Rebecca	Scarlett	Lead Scotland
Ms	Jane	Scott	Queen Margaret University
Ms	Mary	Senior	UCU Scotland
Mr	Alastair	Sim	Universities Scotland
Ms	Emma	Slavin	Skills Development Scotland
Ms	Liz	Smith MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr	Boab	Thomson	Universities Scotland
Ms	Colette	Walker	

Apologies:

Mr	Paul	Little	City of Glasgow College
Mr	Robbie	Francis	Thorntons

1. Welcome and introduction from the Convener

The Convener welcomed the Group to its second virtual meeting during the pandemic and reminded members that this would be the final meeting in the current parliamentary term.

The Convener informed members that Iain Gray MSP is not seeking re-election at the upcoming Scottish Parliament election and thanked Mr Gray for his support of the CPG during his tenure as Vice Convener.

The Convener then introduced the speakers for the meeting and said they would reflect on the last five years in further and higher education and share their hopes and aspirations for both sectors in the new Parliament.

2. Apologies

The Convener noted the apologies for the meeting.

3. Approval of minute from 12 November 2020 meeting

Members approved the minute of the previous meeting.

4. Presentations

Mr Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland

Mr Sim began his presentation by outlining the challenges faced by the university sector during the last five years. Since 2016, teaching funding has been eroded to such an extent that the value of publicly funded places is now just 85.6% of its cost whilst research funding has also decreased at a similar rate with a 17% drop in real terms value. Mr Sim argued that the decline in public funding has been a factor in the number of Scottish universities in the world's top 200 dropping from five in 2016 to three currently.

Mr Sim then moved on to outline the achievements of the higher education sector and noted that there is now a record number of Scottish students being taught at university. 36,930 Scottish domiciles were accepted to a Scottish university in 2020 which is the highest ever accepted in a single year. Mr Sim added that the sector has also made good progress on widening access having met the interim target set by the Scottish Government that 16% of entrants into higher education should be from the most disadvantaged areas of Scotland.

Concluding his presentation, Mr Sim shared his hopes for higher education in the next parliamentary term and told members that a successful university sector will be crucial to Scotland's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of that success will be based on what universities already do, such as world-changing research and community engagement, whilst some will be based on an agile response to changing circumstances. That includes upskilling and reskilling through flexible learning and helping businesses to re-invent products and processes.

Mr Matt Crilly, NUS Scotland

Mr Crilly began his presentation by stating that the current global pandemic has been the most seismic event of the last five years. He added that the pandemic is possibly the best example of how important students are as they were amongst the first to rush to the NHS frontline and contribute to the national effort. This year has proven how resilient the student community is as they adapted to online learning and continued achieving which would have proved impossible if not for the hard work and dedication of staff in colleges and universities.

Continuing, Mr Crilly said that the independent student support review was another major milestone and whilst NUS Scotland welcomed the ambition of the review, a clear plan on the next steps to achieving it has not been forthcoming. He added that Scotland's level of student debt is rising and whilst "free tuition" is often spoken about in Scotland, education is not free. Student support should be tied to the Living Wage so it's not eroded year on year by cost of living increases.

Looking ahead, Mr Crilly stated that NUS Scotland's immediate priority is that students can complete their studies successfully and that people are supported in education and have supportive assessment practices that show an understanding of the circumstances that students are learning in. He added that NUS Scotland will be calling on political parties to support a "student guarantee" at the upcoming election. The guarantee comprises a lifelong right to access education including a commitment to ensuring that student finance meets the real cost of education.

Ms Shona Struthers, Colleges Scotland

Ms Struthers began her presentation by providing an overview of important areas of work for the college sector over the last five years. That included a new governance framework in 2016 followed by a collaborative report with the Fraser of Allander Institute which looked at the economic value of colleges and found that each college graduate generates a return of £55,000 to their life-time earnings. Continuing, Ms Struthers said that the Four Nations College Blueprint in 2019 was the result of the college sector across the UK coming together and working in partnership to ensure that colleges are prepared for the challenges that lie ahead in the post-Brexit landscape.

On emerging from the pandemic and considering the return to campus, Ms Struthers said colleges face a major issue with non-completers because of the impact of the restrictions on practical-based courses. She added that staff in institutions are working incredibly hard to get students through their studies. Discussing the post-pandemic recovery, Ms Struthers said that colleges will be integral to Scotland's success and that a lot of businesses will not reopen and staff will need to be re-deployed and re-trained, perhaps into social care.

5. Discussion and questions

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

Martin Fairbairn, Scottish Funding Council

Mr Fairbairn asked what universities would do with extra funding for the unit of resource or extra funding to reduce the number of funded places.

Mr Sim replied that the Scottish higher education sector has a major structural problem which has resulted in huge levels of borrowing. He added that students won't receive the experience they deserve in the future if the student-staff ratio keeps being eroded, and that the breadth of the student experience and fundamentals of mental health support will be lost.

Colette Walker

Ms Walker informed members that she is the mother of a disabled school-leaver who has struggled with entering further education because of expectations placed on him in terms of coursework. She added that he has faced fundamental barriers to his human right to access education.

Ms Struthers replied that the college sector does its best to reach out to and provide for vulnerable students who have additional support needs. She offered to follow up with Ms Walker after the meeting to provide information on the support available.

Mary Senior, UCU Scotland

Ms Senior referred to the SFC's Review and asked whether now is the right time to be having a Review given the number of pressures that have been articulated throughout the meeting.

Mr Sim replied that he does not believe that now is the right time for fundamental reshaping whilst we are still in the midst of the pandemic. There are aspects of the Review that are most relevant now and would deliver quick, catalytic help for society and the economy as needed right now.

Ms Struthers replied that there is never a good time to change and that we cannot pretend the pandemic has not changed things. She added that many things will never revert back to the way they were and both sectors must take account of this.

Mr Crilly said that students are very worried about potential job losses and that staff-student ratios means in practice that student's do not receive the same one-to-one support and feedback due to time pressures.

Michael Cross, City of Glasgow College

Mr Cross referred to the Cumberford-Little report into the economic value of colleges. Whilst he recognises the call for stability during a pandemic, the report identifies limits on capacity within the system that if released would maximise capacity and ultimately enable colleges to make a fuller contribution to economic recovery.

Ms Struthers replied that the report pushes the college sector to be more flexible than it currently is, which is to be applauded.

Mr Sim welcomed the report's ambition for the college sector but informed members that he was concerned about suggestion of fundamentally changing the funding model. He added that could lead to a disruptive zero-sum game between colleges and universities which would be unwise. Funding streams should be kept apart so the sectors are not forced into a combative rather than collaborative space.

Neil Croll, University of Glasgow

Mr Croll referred to the Scottish Government's Access Data Group which met for over a year and recommended that the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) should remain but that free schools meals (FSMs), and other indicators, should also be used to measure deprivation. He added that so far FSMs has not been adopted as a measure by the Scottish Government and asked how those findings could be re-energised.

Mr Sim replied that he completely agrees that FSMs should be used to measure to deprivation along with SIMD but that ultimately the onus is with the Scottish Government.

Ms Struthers added that a 'basket of measures' approach makes a lot of sense and perhaps this can be picked up in the SFC's Review.

6. Future of the group after 2021 Scottish Parliament election.

The Convener informed members that she had to leave the meeting to attend other business and handed over to the Vice Convener to conduct the rest of the business.

The Vice Convener invited members to discuss whether the Group should be reconstituted after the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. Keith Robson declared that the Group should be re-constituted and Neil Croll seconded the suggestion.

7. Close

In closing the meeting, the Vice Convener said he had enjoyed being a part of the Group and thanked members for interesting discussions throughout the years.