

Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities

7 March 2024 1pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Liz Smith MSP

Michael Marra MSP

Audrey Nicoll MSP

Invited guests

Jamie Arrowsmith, Director Universities UK International

Roy Gardner, Vice Principal, Corporate Development & Innovation, City of Glasgow College

Stephanie Pitticas, Vice Principal (Internationalisation), University of the West of Scotland

Non-MSP Group Members

Aimee Logan, Universities Scotland

Alan MacKay, University of Edinburgh

Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland

Christopher Kennedy, University of Glasgow

Claire Vekic, Colleges Scotland

Daisy Slate, NUS Scotland

Deborah Shepherd, Educational Institute of Scotland

Deborah Smith, Unison

Duncan McKay, University of the West of Scotland

Frances Johnson

Francis W. Hooton

Professor Gareth Miles, University of St Andrews

Garry Ross, Educational Institute of Scotland

Gavin McWhinnie, Office of Liz Smith MSP

Georgia Marks, UCAS

Gillian McElroy, University of the West of Scotland

Jacqueline Moore, Thorntons Law

James McKean, Colleges Scotland

Jane Scott, Queen Margaret University

Jason Miles-Campbell, Jisc
Joanne Buchan, Colleges Scotland
Lauren Wards, Universities Scotland
Lindsey Alexander, University of St Andrews
Louise Crichton, Thorntons Law
Matthew Maclver,
Michael McDaid, Skills Development Scotland
Morgan O'Neill, Thorntons Law
Murdo Mathison, University and College Union
Nick Brewer, University of Dundee
Ray Buist, Audit Scotland
Sarah McAllister, University of Edinburgh
Scott Iguchi-Sherry, University of Glasgow
Shannon Stowers, Quality Assurance Agency
Sinead Griffin, Scottish Funding Council
Stuart Tooley, University of Edinburgh
Susannah Lane, Universities Scotland
Thomas Feige, Edinburgh Napier University
Tom Hall, Colleges Scotland
Veronica Lynch, University of the Highlands and Islands
William Hardie, Robert Gordon University

Apologies

Alastair Delaney, Quality Assurance Agency
Professor Blair Grubb, University of Dundee
Keith Robson, Open University in Scotland
Kevin McStravock, Quality Assurance Agency
Professor Lynn Kilbride, Robert Gordon University
Maggie Chapman MSP, Scottish Parliament
Mary Senior, University and College Union
Dr Neil Croll, University of Glasgow
Professor Paul Little, City of Glasgow College

Welcome and Introduction

Aimee Logan, the Secretariat of the CPG, welcomed members to the meeting and advised that Liz Smith, the Convener, would be joining in a few minutes as Parliamentary business had been delayed. The topic of the meeting was Immigration policy and the prospect of further reform as led by the UK Government, and the implication this has for Scottish higher and further education.

Presentations

Jamie Arrowsmith, Director Universities UK International

Mr Arrowsmith began his presentation by outlining the benefits of international students to the UK as a whole. There has been a growth in the last four years with a rise from 58,000 to 92,000 in Scotland in academic year 2021-2022. He highlighted that this was due to strategy and policy to help stimulate growth. He continued by

evidencing the benefit of international students to the UK as they contribute £41.9b to the UK economy, as illustrated in research by London Economics.

Mr Arrowsmith demonstrated some of the reasons for a growth in international students. This includes: the reputation of the UK as a destination of study; political support for growth; policy narratives such as the post study work visa and graduate route; and global factors such as the pandemic where the UK remained open and welcoming to international students.

He discussed the current policy narrative and current challenges the UK faces. The calls for increased restrictions from Government since October 2022 has challenged the UK's recruitment of international students with restrictions on dependent visas. This dependent change affected around 1 in 10 international students, having a massive impact on recruitment. He also referenced the collapse in the Nigerian economy which doubled the cost of UK education for most Nigerian students. He then highlighted a challenge around the communication of the changes to dependents international students, which deterred international students from coming to the UK.

Mr Arrowsmith noted that in November last year, a decline in international students had already been seen, and had advised the UK Government of this and to not take further restrictive measures. However, on 4 December 2023 a review of the graduate route was announced which has not been well received in international markets. In a survey, half of prospective students, mainly in India and Nigeria, noted they would reconsider their destination of study if the post study work offer was removed. The survey also noted students who have already chosen to study in the UK in academic year 2024-2025 are reconsidering their decision, due to uncertainty of the UK Government's commitment to the graduate route. He illustrated that this is just one factor in challenges the UK is facing. Other challenges included; global economic problems; more competitive offers and the reopening of systems elsewhere in the world, which makes for a difficult recruitment environment outwith the policy changes happening within the UK.

Roy Gardner, Vice Principal, Corporate Development & Innovation, City of Glasgow College

Mr Gardner noted the focus of his contribution would be around the parity and difference of UKVI policy between colleges and universities.

UKVI policy considers SCQF levels 7 and 8 as below degree level when they really correspond with degree level year one and two. This issue, poses challenges to the college sector as it forms a basis of many of their policy decisions.

Mr Gardner highlighted some of the differences between colleges and universities in the study route e.g. college students on a tier four visa can work up to ten hours per week but university students on the same visa can work up to twenty hours per week. He noted six other key differences: the time caps; English language; rules and dependents; the graduate route; attendance requirements; and study hours.

Within the time caps, international students are only allowed to study at college for two years, whereas, they can study for three to four years at university. This means international students cannot progress from an NC to a HND as this would require a further two years which is not possible on their visa. Regarding English language, universities can conduct their own test, but to study at college, international students

must attend an English language centre which may not be available in their city or even country e.g. students from Angola must go to South Africa to attend their closest centre. Regarding dependants, from January 2024, college students cannot bring dependents with them, therefore, dependents must apply through a visitor visa, which can deter international students from attending college. Mr Gardner then looked at the graduate route. He stated that students who complete a HND are not necessarily applicable to the graduate route because the UKVI do not see a HND as a degree, despite being ready for the workforce. He then moved on to attendance requirements. At college, students who have an 85% or less attendance record within one month must have an intervention from the college to monitor their attendance, equalling around ten days. Mr Gardner then went on to his final area of discussion, study hours. The UKVI have enforced a rule that college students must have 15 hours of face-to-face class teaching time, meanwhile universities have their own discretion on study hours and self-directed study.

He emphasised that these restrictions place pressure on colleges and can hinder their recruitment of international students.

Stephanie Pitticas, Vice Principal (Internationalisation), University of the West of Scotland

Ms Pitticas provided background information on the University of the West of Scotland which is the fourth biggest recruiter of international students in Scotland. 38% of their students across the five campuses and all levels of study are international students. This has required significant investment from the university to support their international students in terms of staff, teaching and resources. UWS has pledged adoption of the UK Agent Quality Framework, ensuring commitment to transparency and integrity to international student recruitment. Ms Pitticas highlighted that the UK is in competition with other English-speaking countries e.g. Australia, Canada and the United States of America (USA) rather than with other universities within the UK in recruitment of international students. She suggested the policy environment is crucial as she believes the UK's competitors have more favourable policy environments for international students.

Ms Pitticas outlined the challenges faced by universities in recruiting international students, noting the dependants rule change whereby international students cannot bring dependants while completing their studies. This had a disproportionate impact on women as the enrolment of females has decreased e.g. UWS' London campus with an 81% decrease and Scotland seen a 77% decrease; a stark example was the university's Masters in Education programme which seen a drop from 44 joining in the last intake to now, 0. She also referred to the announcement of the Migration Advisory Committee's (MAC) review of the post-study work visa noting a 44% decrease in the January intake following the announcement of the review. Ms Pitticas noted issues with visa processing delays meaning some international students with complex cases cannot enter the country and begin their studies, putting universities in an impossible position. Ms Pitticas warned that these changes have driven international students to study in Canada, Australia and the USA. She highlighted that these issues all contradict the UK Government's International Education Strategy which aims to grow international student numbers.

In conclusion, Ms Pitticas noted that universities wish to see consistency within the policy environment regarding international students..

Question and Answer

Ms Smith thanked the speakers for their contributions and apologised for her delayed arrival due to Parliamentary business, before opening the question and answer session.

Georgia Marks, UCAS

Ms Marks noted UCAS data on international students where there has been a small increase UK wide; whereas Scotland seen a 2% decrease in applications.

Christopher Kennedy, Unite Scotland/University of Glasgow

If universities were too optimistic in planning for ever-increasing international student numbers within their budgets; and how do universities compensate for decreasing domestic student funding and address these problems?

Jamie Arrowsmith, Director Universities UK International

Universities did plan for fluctuating international student numbers and recognise that numbers were going to change, but numbers have fallen further than predicted due to unforeseen geopolitical shocks.

Stephanie Pitticas, University of the West of Scotland

For universities, it is all about planning and realism is what we always bring to the table when it comes to international student recruitment with a lot of data analysis to predict growth and decreases. Universities do tend to be more realistic than optimistic.

Murdo Mathison, University and College Union

Immigration policy impacts on staff as well as students, in particular the salary threshold for skilled workers, which has an impact on early careers and post-doctoral students. He asked whether there are any good studies or surveys on impact of immigration policy changes on international students that people could share; and how can politicians influence their colleagues around the post-study work visa; and how can we support them?

Liz Smith MSP

From a politician's perspective this issue is too important for 'party political football'. In 2013/14 we had a CPG that was effective on this issue and I am of the opinion we have to do this again. There are very important issues around visas and we do not want a system that is too constraining. It is time for cross party discussion on this issue so we get it right for Scotland.

Roy Gardner, City of Glasgow College

We would be happy with parity with universities when it comes to UKVI policy. Colleges provide a skilled workforce to society from varied countries across the world.

Jamie Arrowsmith, Universities UK International

Completely agree that work has to be done around the skilled worker salary threshold. Makes it difficult for the UK to attract international students due to this, having a significant impact and posing challenges to our attractiveness. Working with UCEA on this. Can follow up afterwards with resources we have such as surveys if helpful.

Daisy Slate, NUS Scotland

How do we ensure a good quality of life for international students once they arrive in the UK and ensure it is as good quality as their education? We should ensure they are supported throughout their educational journey.

Stephanie Pitticias, University of the West of Scotland

We are in regular contact with our students but the sector sponsors the person, and we may be unaware they are bringing dependants which is a key frustration within the sector. If institutions had this information, with our role and connections, we could have done something about their accommodation and other requirements prior to their arrival. It would be fantastic to get this information once they accept their place at university.

Michael Marra MSP

This policy area is about stability of policy making and elements of predictability where the Government works with the sector to create policy in the long term rather than reactive, which it has been of recent. Spoken to a lot of academics and principals who are concerned about this policy area and have reflected concerns to Westminster colleagues and impacts on the sector. It is great concern to me that the recent drop off in arrival of students for this academic term and the figures are eye watering. This comes alongside a challenging budget setting for the sector and

trying to understand how to work through those issues. Happy to work with Liz and other colleagues around the post-study work visa which we recommitted to in our recent conference. Should never lose sight of the contribution of international students to our universities and society.

Deborah Shepherd, Educational Institute of Scotland

With the drop off in international students, we are seeing marked reductions in student recruitment which can pose a threat to employment. In the wider front, we are looking at the impact we may see in workforces beyond higher education and further education in places such as healthcare and social care sectors. A lot of international students work in assistant roles to support themselves throughout university and then seek to move permanent roles in the NHS or other sectors, the reduction of international students and new salary thresholds is having significant impact on the workforce.

Audrey Nicoll MSP

Noted the discussion and issues raised and was keen to hear what the issues are around international students in the North East with particular regard to the energy sector.

Conclusion

Ms Smith closed the meeting by thanking speakers for their contribution and insightful questions from members. Ms Smith also thanked Alastair Sim, former Director of Universities Scotland, for his engagement with politicians and advocacy work he had undertaken during his time at Universities Scotland. Members were informed that Universities Scotland's new Director, Claire McPherson will take up the role in late March.