

Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities

Thursday 19 September 2024 1pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Liz Smith MSP
Audrey Nicoll MSP
Michael Marra MSP
Roz McCall MSP

Invited guests

1. Sai Shraddha Suresh Viswanathan, President, NUS Scotland.
2. Andy Witty, Director of Strategic Policy and Corporate Governance, Colleges Scotland.
3. Kate Ogden, Institute of Fiscal Studies, Senior Research Economist.

Non-MSP Group Members

Aimee Logan, Universities Scotland
Professor Blair Grubb, University of Dundee
Chris Kennedy, Unite the Union
Dr Claire Carney, City of Glasgow College
Frances Johnson, University of Edinburgh
Jane Scott, Queen Margaret University
Jason Miles-Campbell, Jisc
Jessica Armstrong, University of Edinburgh
John Mooney, UNISON
Katy Wilson, Audit Scotland
Keith Robson, Open University in Scotland
Lauren Wards, Universities Scotland
Matthew MacIver, University of the Highlands and Islands
Murdo Mathison, University and Colleges Union
Paula Dixon, EIS
Phillip Bale, University of Aberdeen
Ray Buist, Audit Scotland
Seonag MacKinnon, University of Aberdeen
Sinead Griffin, Scottish Funding Council
Suzy Powell, Interface Online

Thomas Feige, Edinburgh Napier University
Tom Hall, Colleges Scotland

Apologies

Professor Gareth Miles, University of St Andrews
Professor John Blicharski, University of Dundee
Kenny Harrison
Lindsey Alexander, University of St Andrews
Maggie Chapman MSP, Scottish Parliament
Nathan Tyler, West Scotland College
Susannah Lane, Universities Scotland
William Hardie, Robert Gordon University

Welcome and Introduction

Ms Smith welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced the topic of the meeting, tertiary funding.

Presentations

Sai Shraddha Suresh Viswanathan, President, NUS Scotland:

- Ms Viswanathan set the scene for the funding settlement. The pressure to “do more with less” is pushing colleges and universities to the brink.
- Students are in survival mode and most vulnerable in society with the cost of living crisis where they cannot afford basic necessities, some putting work before their studies in order to make ends meet and 12% being homeless. Currently in a mental health crisis and decrease in hardship funding as services are impacted through cuts.
- International students receive very little support and have to pay months’ worth of rent upfront, high fees and are not entitled to student loans.
- One-off funding settlements are not sustainable, the sector needs real terms increases to fill the funding gap and prevent cross-subsidy of international students.

Andy Witty, Director of Strategic Policy and Corporate Governance, Colleges Scotland:

- Mr Witty spoke of the Fraser of Allander report which showed colleges boost the economy by £8 billion and that return on investment is critical for growth, which colleges provide.
- Colleges help eradicate child poverty, a main goal of the Scottish Government and are key to meeting this goal.
- college funding fluctuates but there has been a £100m drop since 2021/22, although costs are increasing. 17% cut in real terms since 2021. £26 million in transition funds, mental health funding and the flexible workforce development fund has been taken back. Audit Scotland report which covers 20 colleges, 11 are in deficit.

- Colleges are facing voluntary severance with 1,700 already taking this in four years, with more predicted.
- Reform in the sector needs to be funded but are looking at what needs to change and how this could change without additional funding – “think the unthinkable”.
- A fundamental review of the funding model needs to be taken and pace of change needs to increase for the critical change needed now.

Kate Ogden, Institute of Fiscal Studies, Senior Research Economist.

- Ms Ogden said that Scottish universities rely on income from international student fees to cross-subsidise funding. International fees made up half of income associated with teaching for Scottish universities in 2022/23, up from 30% in 2016/17.
- The teaching grant has not increased since 2009 and universities are now receiving 19% less in real terms for funding per student.
- Warns of in-year cuts, which happened in 2023/24, as this does not protect university funding and counts as a real-terms cut.

Question and Answer

Liz Smith MSP, Scottish Parliament

Should we consider a package where tuition fee and cost of living support accompany each other?

Sai Shraddha Suresh Viswanathan, NUS Scotland

Ideally, yes but this would not support international students as they are not entitled to tuition fee support. We need to do more.

Keith Robson, Open University in Scotland

Part-time students require funding and this has been a Scottish Government action to address since 2017, but without action.

Andy Witty, Colleges Scotland

Part-time funding is key. There is a need for upskilling and reskilling the workforce, which usually happens on a part-time basis. Without funding, this will be difficult.

Professor Blair Grubb, University of Dundee

What can we do to enhance our financial support and increase levels of funding?
Damage to international students due to immigration policies – we should be welcoming international students to Scotland.

Liz Smith MSP, Scottish Parliament

Across all parties, MSPs are working together on a different approach to international students. We visited the University of Dundee as part of the finance committee and received a very strong message regarding the importance of international students from the Principal and Universities Scotland Convener, Professor Iain Gillespie.

Chris Kennedy, Unite the Union

International students are very important and we are in competition with other markets. With decreases in funding and therefore, quality, international students are choosing to go outside of Scotland. On part-time funding, this is needed as we reskill and upskill society. Universities and Colleges and places of transition and must work together on this.

Dr Claire Carney, City of Glasgow College

The cost of teaching a student sits approximately at £1,800 but currently colleges only receive £1,285 of funding per student. Colleges deliver a number of degree programmes with this funding but it does not cover the cost of teaching students. This funding needs to increase and be considered in any future funding developments.

Paula Dixon, EIS-FELA

Looking at the Audit Scotland report, it is clear colleges are being more creative with less money with staff leaving in droves, which can be due to voluntary redundancies. There is a severe impact on students with reduction in mental health funding, additional support needs funding. There is a renewed sense of urgency.

Andy Witty, Colleges Scotland

Colleges mitigate these impacts and are making tough decisions. We are seeing impacts on retention and pressures of staff. Funding needs to be increased, cuts reversed, equity for all and increased pace of reform.

Michael Marra MSP, Scottish Parliament

Hope the Audit Scotland report does result in more open and honest conversations regarding funding. Good to know about the working groups and hope others across the sector are doing the same to marry up funding and reform together.

Audrey Nicoll MSP, Scottish Parliament

I have conversations every week with business who raise the issues of upskilling, reskilling and skill planning. Believe this could be part of the post-school reform to marry up businesses and industry.

Conclusion

Ms Smith closed the meeting by thanking speakers for their contribution and insightful questions from members. She stated the next meeting will be later in the year.