

Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities

Thursday 23 September 2021 13.00-14.00

Minute

Present

MSPs

Ms Liz Smith MSP
Mr Michael Marra MSP
Ms Maggie Chapman MSP
Ms Kaukab Stewart MSP
Ms Michelle Thomson MSP

Invited guests

Professor Iain Gillespie, University of Dundee
Ms Carol Turnbull, Ayrshire College

Non-MSP Group Members

Dr John Blicharski, University of Dundee
Mr Stuart Brown, EIS
Ms Joanne Buchan, Colleges Scotland
Dr Aurora Constantin, University of Edinburgh
Mr Neil Croll, University of Glasgow
Prof Blair Grubb, University of Dundee
Mr Tom Hall, Colleges Scotland
Mr Kenny Harrison
Mr Graeme Hendry, Skills Development Scotland
Mr Grant Jarvie, University of Edinburgh
Dr John Kemp, University of the Highlands
Mr Chris Kennedy, Unite the Union
Dr Paul Little, City of Glasgow College
Prof Matthew Maciver, University of the Highlands and Islands
Mr Murdo Mathison, UCU Scotland
Dr Judith McClure
Mr Duncan McKay, Universities Scotland
Ms Suzy Powell, Interface
Ms Lynne Raeside, Scottish Funding Council
Mr Keith Robson, The Open University in Scotland
Ms Jane Scott, Queen Margaret University

Mr Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland
Ms Emma Slavin, Skills Development Scotland
Mr Boab Thomson, Universities Scotland
Ms Gemma Wilson, Audit Scotland

Apologies

Ms Beatrice Wishart MSP
Ms Mary Senior, UCU Scotland
Mr Robbie Francis, Thorntons Law
Mr Gavin Donoghue, University of Edinburgh

Welcome and introduction from the current Convener

The Convener welcomed the Group to its first meeting in session six of the Scottish Parliament and informed members that today's meeting would be in two parts: firstly, the business of reconstituting the group and secondly, a discussion on the college and university role in Scotland's recovery from the pandemic. Ms Smith informed members that we'd hear from Professor Iain Gillespie, Principal of the University of Dundee, and Carol Turnbull, Principal of Ayrshire College. Ms Smith added that topic was very important and timely as the pandemic is likely to have significant long term implications for the economy.

The Convener then advised that a number of new MSP have joined the group and invited members to welcome: Michael Marra (Scottish Labour); Kaukab Stewart (SNP); Maggie Chapman (Scottish Greens); and Michelle Thomson (SNP).

The Convener also invited members to welcome back to the group Beatrice Wishart (Scottish Liberal Democrats) and Clare Adamson (SNP) as MSP members from the previous session.

Apologies

The Convener noted the apologies for the meeting.

Re-registration business

The Convener explained the process for the re-registration of CPGs and said that groups have until 31 October 2021 to re-register. Ms Smith also advised that the group needs to elect office bearers as set out in Section 6.2 of the Code. This includes a Convener, Vice Convener and secretariat.

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

Kaukab Stewart MSP declared her intention to seek election as Vice Convener and was formally nominated by Liz Smith MSP. Alastair Sim seconded the nomination.

Members then approved the re-election of Universities Scotland, with support from Colleges Scotland, as the secretariat of the group.

Presentations

Professor Iain Gillespie, University of Dundee

Professor Gillespie began his presentation by stating that the University of Dundee is a triple-intensive university with strengths in learning and teaching, engagement and enterprise, and research with impact. He added that these strengths help prepare students for the workforce and will help the institution contribute to transforming the economy.

Referring to a report published by the National Centre for Entrepreneurship in Education on behalf of Universities Scotland, Professor Gillespie said that over the next five years, Scotland's universities are projected to provide close to 1.3 million days' worth of training and upskilling – the equivalent of half a day for Scotland's entire workforce. Universities are also projected to contribute to over £400m of local regeneration and development funding and the sector will also provide £1.2 billion of not-for-profit support to businesses and charities.

Providing an example of Dundee's business-focused innovation and enterprise creation, Professor Gillespie spoke of Exscientia, a world leader in AI-driven drug discovery and a spinout of the University. He added that Exscientia is a real "unicorn" as it is well on the way to becoming a £1bn company.

Concluding his presentation, Professor Gillespie said that whilst universities can attract private funding and foreign direct investment (FDI), the sector also needs public investment to maintain excellence and allow universities to make a full contribution to the nation's recovery.

Ms Carol Turnbull, Ayrshire College

Ms Turnbull began her presentation by providing data about the college sector in Scotland. In academic year 2019/20, there were 239,000 students in further education with the college sector supporting over 11,000 modern apprentices. Over 26,000 students enrolled in digital skills and the sector also supporting the Young Person's Guarantee and the National Transition Training Fund.

Ms Turnbull then stated that colleges are anchor institutions in their communities and supported individuals and businesses throughout the pandemic. For example, City of Glasgow College had 247 Naval Cadet officers supplying local communities with food and medicines whilst other colleges repurposed 3D printing machines to support the production of PPE. The sector also reconfigured thousands and laptop and other digital devices to enable students across Scotland to keep learning.

Whilst the sector already engages with thousands of businesses per year, Ms Turnbull said that colleges are now focused on strengthening their role in driving economic growth. Ms Turnbull added that the sector is looking to embed and strengthen a

regional planning approach which reflects the key points in the Scottish Funding Council's Review and the Cumberford-Little Report.

Discussion and questions

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

Liz Smith MSP, Scottish Parliament

Ms Smith remarked that colleges and universities stepped up during the pandemic and commended both sectors for now turning their attention to supporting Scotland's recovery. She asked the speakers what more could be done to improve collaboration with business and industry to drive economic growth.

Professor Gillespie replied that both universities and colleges already have strong relationships with industry in terms of the work-ready graduates they produce. He added that long-term funding settlements from the Scottish Government would enable universities to be a more strategic and provide greater flexibility and freedom to engage with business partners.

Ms Turnbull said that colleges and universities should continue to be represented on key industry networks, adding that by having "a seat at the table", both sectors can strengthen relationships with business.

Dr Judith McClure

Dr McClure asked whether colleges and universities were able to maintain strong links with China during the pandemic.

Professor Gillespie replied that by far the largest portion of international students come from China and that universities are determined to maintain, and strengthen, partnerships with China. Whilst there's a lot of political noise about China, there's a real desire to increase collaboration with the country on research and innovation.

Michael Marra MSP, Scottish Parliament

Mr Marra said that colleges and universities are anchor institutions and add so much economically and culturally to Scotland. He then asked how the sectors are ensuring there are opportunities for students to study abroad in light of the UK's departure from the EU.

Professor Gillespie said there's a challenge for the sector in ensuring the Turing Scheme, which was welcomed by all in the sector, is extended and that there's a long-term commitment from the UK Government to fund it. At the moment, there is far more demand than supply and the sector will continue to work with the UK Government to ensure there are more opportunities for students to study abroad.

Ms Turnbull added that colleges benefit greatly from outward mobility and that the sector is keen to support student to continue studying abroad where possible.

Dates of future meetings in the new parliamentary year.

The Convener advised that Parliament has announced that all CPG meetings should be held virtually until at least after the October recess. Beyond that, Parliament has not yet reached a decision on when in-person meetings can resume.

Ms Smith said that due to this uncertainty, meetings for the year ahead have not been scheduled but that the next meeting of the group should go ahead in January 2022. She added that Universities Scotland would be in touch with members to confirm a date, and whether this will be in-person or virtual, as soon as possible.

Close

The Convener closed the meeting and thanked members for attending.