

Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities

Thursday 27 April 1pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Liz Smith MSP, Scottish Parliament
Michael Marra MSP, Scottish Parliament

Invited guests

Ms Polina Klochko, student, University of Glasgow
Ms Helen Kennedy, Head of Research, University of the West of Scotland
Mr Brian Dunn, Head of Sector, Ms Joy Aiken, Manager of Part-time Programmes and
Ms Oleksandra Kobets, student, North East Scotland College.

Non-MSP Group Members

Ms Aimee Logan, Universities Scotland
Mr Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland
Mr Christopher Kennedy, University of Glasgow
Ms Claire Vekic, Colleges Scotland
Mr David Lott, Universities Scotland
Mr Duncan McKay, Universities Scotland
Ms Emma Slavin, Skills Development Scotland
Mr Frances Johnson, University of Edinburgh
Mr Gareth Miles, University of St Andrews
Mr Gavin McWhinnie, Office of Liz Smith MSP
Ms Jane Scott, Queen Margaret University
Ms Joanne Buchan, Colleges Scotland
Mr Kevin McStravock, Quality Assurance Agency
Ms Lindsey Alexander, University of St Andrews
Ms Liza Boiffen-Yordanov, University of Aberdeen
Mr Philip Bale, University of Aberdeen
Mr Thomas Feige, Edinburgh Napier University
Mr Tom Hall, Colleges Scotland
Ms Vivian MacDonald, University of Edinburgh

Apologies

Mr Alastair Delaney, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Professor Blair Grubb, University of Dundee
Mr Georgios Pappas, Glasgow Kelvin College
Mr Graeme Henry, Skills Development Scotland
Dr John Blicharski, University of Dundee
Ms Judith McClure
Mr Keith Robson, Open University in Scotland
Ms Lucy Evans, University of Edinburgh
Ms Maggie Chapman MSP
Ms Mary Senior, University and College Union
Mr Matthew MacIver, University of the Highlands and Islands
Mr Michael McDaid, Skills Development Scotland
Dr Neil Croll, University of Glasgow
Ms Susannah Lane, Universities Scotland
Ms Suzy Powell, Interface Online

Welcome and Introduction

Ms Smith welcome the members to the meeting. Ms Smith advised members that future meetings will be held in-person in the Scottish Parliament. Ms Smith outlined online etiquette for the meeting and asked if there were any objections to a picture being taken. Ms Smith welcomed the speakers to the CPG and introduced them to the members.

Presentations

Ms Polina Klochko, student at the University of Glasgow

Ms Klochko began her presentation by introducing herself as a student who has come from Ukraine due to the ongoing conflict and is now studying English Literature and Spanish at the University of Glasgow. She recalled when she was awoken by her mother and told she could not go to university due to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. She stated that her life changed forever in that moment as the usual life of a Ukrainian student was disrupted, she could no longer think about studying but how to survive. She said Ukraine had their best weapon, intellectual development and the ability to rebuild Ukraine. She decided to apply for exchange to the University of Glasgow and described it as one of the best and most crucial decisions of her life.

She continued by telling the story of her arrival to Scotland. Ms Klochko arrived in Glasgow in September 2022, having always dreamt of being an exchange student but never thought this is how it would happen. She stated she was concerned about how she would fit in and adapt to life in Scotland but the University of Glasgow made the transition seamless with the various packages of support they provided to help her succeed socially and academically. She followed on by commending the atmosphere at the University of Glasgow and by Scotland as a whole as everyone was very friendly, welcoming and supportive, making her feel at ease and ready to learn.

The outlined the various packages of support the university supported her with and how she struggled at times. Ms Klochko dictated her struggles with easy writing and understanding the various Scottish accents but knew how important these were and received support from the university on how to write essays and over time, she began to understand the Scottish accent. She continued by telling of the different activities put on by the University of Glasgow. These included an introduction event with Ukrainian and Scottish music to merge the cultures, Scottish-Ukrainian Christmas where other Ukrainian students came together to have Christmas together with gifts given by the university, Burns Supper where she learned traditional Scottish dances and socialised with other students.

She continued her presentation by talking about the one year anniversary of the war. On the anniversary, many Ukrainian students and academics gathered in the memorial chapel of the university to pay tribute to their friends and loved ones they lost or are still in Ukraine. Ms Klochko thanked the university of Glasgow by providing her with this supportive community that made her feel safe, welcomed and valued. She stated that Scottish people are the most welcoming and she is very grateful for this experience.

She concluded her presentation by thanking everyone involved in her transition to the University of Glasgow and how she plans to use the skills she has learned here by going back to Ukraine when it is safe and begin to rebuild her country.

Ms Helen Kennedy, Head of Research at the University of the West of Scotland

Ms Kennedy started her presentation by giving a brief outline of the twinning scheme. She stated that the UK-Ukraine twinning scheme is an institution-to-institution collaboration model coordinated by Cormack Consultancy Group and the President's Fund of Ukraine for Education, Science, and Sports with the support of Universities UK International. She highlighted that UWS have also been very well supported by Universities Scotland to get this partnership up and running effectively.

Ms Kennedy continued to showcase the support UWS have provided through the twinning arrangement. UWS's partner representatives at the Ukrainian State University of Railway Transport (USURT) tell UWS that the life of their university has changed completely, and they need to protect their smart students, to give them hope for the future. USURT is located in Kharkiv – within a minute's missile strike from the Russian border. She continued by outlining the purpose of the partnership which is to help USURT get through this very difficult period. UWS are exploring joint teaching and learning opportunities and research collaboration. Academics and administrative staff on both sides are getting to know each other as the partnership is growing beyond members of the Executive teams who provided the initial support and kick start to build the relationship.

UWS provided resources to help supply power to the USURT campus during outages via generators, mini power banks for students, and USB lighting. Cormack Consultancy Group teamed UWS up with a local partner who was able to get the supplies delivered as "emergency aid". As well as physical aid, UWS are developing English language support for USURT staff and students through UWS's School of

Education and Social Sciences. Access to training in research methods, employability and global citizenship is also under development.

Ms Kennedy continued by emphasising the need for funding for these type of projects and funding UWS have already won. On the one-year anniversary of the twinning initiative, UWS PVC research innovation and engagement Professor Milan Radosavljevic was delighted to announce receipt of £190k for a research collaborative project with USURT to focus on addressing rail freight transport challenges, which is contributing to a global food shortage affecting billions of people worldwide. The funding is provided by the UK-Ukraine Research and Innovation twinning grants scheme, and involves UKRI's Research England and Universities UK International.

She highlighted the difficulty Ukraine is facing due to the damage of their rail infrastructure and the importance of this project. She stated that rail freight transport is critical for the economic development and welfare of Ukraine, which has been significantly affected by the conflict – about 70 percent of cargo transportation in Ukraine is carried out by railway. A team of research leaders, academics from the UWS School of Computing, Engineering and Physical Sciences with teams at USURT are focusing on four work packages:

1. Innovative design of the grain transportation vehicle (GTV) to reduce their dynamic load new materials, components and modularity modelling;
2. Improvement of grain logistics (increasing grain batches from 15-25 GTVs)
3. Composite reinforcement of concrete sleepers – proof of concept design.
4. Project and Risk Management Arrangements are underway with the hope that a representative from each work pack will be able to visit UWS in person in August 2023.

Ms Kennedy concluded her presentation by showcasing UWS's long term commitment to Ukraine and USURT in this time of need and how they plan to continue this partnership in the long term. She illustrated that this is a prime example of UWS being a good global citizen and civic university.

Mr Brian Dunn, Head of Sector, Ms Joy Aiken, Head of Part-time Programmes and Olkesandra Kobets, student, at North East Scotland College

Mr Dunn began the presentation by highlighting they will focus on the provision of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and the impact over the last year. Mr Dunn stated that since the invasion of Ukraine, the impact on ESOL has been very significant with 1,425 Ukrainian refugees enrolling according to SFC figures in 2022. He continued by stating the profile of these students, many of whom are female with families coming from Ukraine.

Mr Dunn continued his presentation by outlining the support North East Scotland College provide. He described it as a 'one stop shop' for support as they provide an academic tutor, student funding advice, pre-entry guidance, careers advice, mental health support, additional learning support and a refugee trauma counsellor.

Ms Aiken followed Mr Dunn and she spoke about part-time students. Ms Aiken outlined that most of the Ukrainian enrolments are part-time as many of them work alongside

their studies and/or have children. She highlighted that they have adapted class times to start at 9:30am and finish before 2:45pm and now offer weekend courses as many of the families who come with children do not have wider family in Scotland to help care for their children while they study. This has allowed for increased retention of Ukrainian students at North East Scotland College.

Ms Aiken stated that taking a collaborative approach has worked really well between the College and the community in Aberdeen. Citizens of Aberdeen have come together and set up a Ukrainian hub where members of the public may donate food toiletries and more. They also teach them valuable skills such as knitting on a Sunday morning. The College has been working with the hubs to offer them opportunities for learning.

Ms Oleksandra Kobets concluded the NESCC presentation by thanking Scotland and the College for supporting Ukrainian students and refugees as it is vitally important to save lives. She outlined the difficulty for some Ukrainians to learn English and many are professionals in their area of expertise but cannot get a job in the same industry due to their inability to speak fluent English. She stated that many want to learn English and now are beginning to do so and will be able to share their knowledge in Scotland.

Question and Answer

Ms Smith opened the question and answer session following both presentations.

Liz Smith MSP: (to everyone) Can any of you say if there are other aspects of collaboration or research that you would like to see happen to sustain the twinning partnerships?

David Lott: In my spare time I volunteer with Cormack Consultancy. I think there is always the question about resourcing these partnerships as there were more high quality bids than funding available. Real challenge now on getting things across borders of getting equipment to the UN and then the UN to Ukraine. For ESOL, in the Ukraine twinning partnership students can learn English for free and this maybe could be a place for collaboration there.

Brian Dunn: That would be helpful David. Language is key for integration, employment and next steps. We are looking at innovative and different ways for ESOL and could be explored further.

Liz Smith (to Polina Klochko): How easy is it for you to communicate with people at home just now in Ukraine?

Polina Klochko: It has become easier lately but it was very difficult during the winter. I would worry about my friends and family who are still at home in Ukraine as I could not contact them.

Liz Smith (to Polina Klochko): Is it easy to communicate with students in Scotland at different institutions?

Polina Klochko: It is very easy, I just have to get used to the culture and the technology. It is not difficult as everyone is so welcoming, kind and friendly.

Jane Scott (to Helen Kennedy): Have you any insights to share on problems you've encountered in delivering a research project with a partner operating in a war situation and how you and your partner have mitigated them?

Helen Kennedy: We are still finding our feet at the moment but our technology is now working to communicate between the two institutions. Most people taking part in the collaboration across the two institutions have perfect English but we are using interpreters. We are taking a project management approach where we have good agendas and try and stick to them, give people a chance and a voice and take good minutes and notes. We have a very open dialogue which does help and the question of what else can we do is always asked.

Liz Smith (to Brian Dunn and Joy Aiken): Is there any input from schools in supporting Ukrainian students?

Brian Dunn: We are always extending our school links and programmes. So far, there hasn't been a demand for the college to support the schools around English language but this may change. There is an organisation College of Sanctuary, University of Sanctuary and such and I believe the University of Aberdeen are progressing their application around this. This will establish further links between schools, colleges and universities in Aberdeen.

Liz Smith (to David Lott): You had mentioned earlier that there was so much happening there was not enough resources to go around, have you found it difficult to set priorities to where this resource may go?

David Lott: Twinning calls really focus on the immediate needs of institutions in Ukraine and the nature of the collaboration people want to see in the long term. The immediate needs is the practicality of institutions in Ukraine receiving equipment.

Liz Smith (to Polina Klochko and Oleksandra Kobets): How is the accommodation you have received on coming to Scotland?

Oleksandra Kobets: I'm currently living in a hotel with my two young children awaiting an apartment. It has been great and we have everything we need.

Polina Klochko: The University of Glasgow have provided me with student accommodation where I live with other Ukrainian students who attend the university. I also receive a payment every month to support my living costs while studying at the University of Glasgow.

David Lott: A common feature in the discussion of research partnership is the Ukrainian and Scotland based colleagues are looking towards Horizon Europe as a way of collaborating.

Conclusion

Ms Smith thanked the speakers on behalf of members within the meeting.

Ms Smith stated that future meetings are likely to take place in-person within the Scottish Parliament. She said that will advise members of this as soon as we can.