

# Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities

4 October 2023 1pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Liz Smith MSP

Michael Marra MSP

Liam Kerr MSP

Roz McCall MSP

Invited guests

Alastair Sim, Director Universities Scotland

Shona Struthers, Chief Executive Colleges Scotland

Professor Alastair Robertson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Learning and Teaching Glasgow  
Caledonian University

Audrey Cumberland, Principal and Chief Executive Edinburgh College

Non-MSP Group Members

Aimee Logan, Universities Scotland

Christopher Kennedy, University of Glasgow

Claire Vekic, Colleges Scotland

Duncan McKay, University of the West of Scotland

Eva Nailard, University of St Andrews

Fiona Forrest-Anderson, Edinburgh Napier University

Fiona Stewart, Skills Development Scotland

Francis Hooton

Professor Gareth Miles, University of St Andrews

Graeme Hendry, Skills Development Scotland

Grant Hill, University of Dundee

Dr James McKean, Colleges Scotland

James Prentice, Skills Development Scotland

Jason Miles-Campbell, Jisc

Jennifer McGregor, University of Edinburgh

Kathryn O'Loan, QAA

Keith Robson, Open University in Scotland

Kirsty Conlon, Universities Scotland

Lindsey Alexander, University of St Andrews

Lynne Raeside, Scottish Funding Council  
Matthew Maclver, University of the Highlands and Islands  
Michael McDaid, Skills Development Scotland  
Murdo Mathieson, University and College Union  
Nathan Tyler, West College Scotland  
Philip Bale, University of Aberdeen  
Shelley Breckenridge, Interface Online  
Sinead Griffin, Scottish Funding Council  
Thomas Feige, Edinburgh Napier University  
Vonnie Sandlan, Universities Scotland

## Apologies

Alastair Delaney, QAA  
Professor Blair Grubb, University of Dundee  
Jane Davidson, Queen Margaret University  
Professor John Blicharski, University of Dundee  
Judith McClure  
Kaukab Stewart MSP  
Kevin McStravick, QAA  
Maggie Chapman MSP  
Mary Senior, UCU  
Paul Little, City of Glasgow College  
Terry Brotherstone, University of Aberdeen  
Beatrice Wishart MSP

## Welcome and Introduction

Ms Smith welcomed everyone to the first in-person meeting of the Parliamentary year for the cross-party group. She introduced the topic of the meeting, the Withers review and the post-school reform agenda. She emphasised the need for a holistic approach across Parliament and the higher and further education sector to ensure the reforms are introduced successfully.

## Annual General Meeting

Ms Smith passed over to Ms Shona Struthers to chair the elections for Convener and Vice Convener of the group. Ms Smith indicated her wish to continue as Convener. This was seconded and then approved by the group.

Michael Marra MSP had indicated his wish to become Vice Convener of the group, in advance of the meeting. This was seconded and then approved by the group.

Ms Struthers passed the chairing of the meeting back to Ms Smith who then chaired the election for Secretariat of the group. Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland indicated their wish to continue as joint Secretariat, which the group approved. Ms Smith finished the elections by highlighting the MSP membership of the group.

**The AGM was concluded.**

## **Presentations**

### **Mr Alastair Sim, Director, Universities Scotland**

Mr Sim began his presentation by welcoming the membership to the meeting and thanking them for inviting him to speak on the opportunities and risks facing the sector as part of the Withers Review and post-school reforms. He spoke about the vast array of reports that the Scottish Government published before Summer recess and how he has taken the time to digest them and can now share the overall views of the sector.

Looking at the positive aspects of the Withers Review and reform agenda, Mr Sim highlighted the importance of parity of esteem between colleges and universities and the importance of policy that enabled them both to work together. He also welcomed Withers' emphasis on the need for a focus on lifelong learning and additional support for part-time students to allow students to thrive and people to learn continuously throughout their lives. Mr Sim welcomed Withers' and Scottish Government's recognition of universities and colleges as key providers for skills and attribute for success; however, there is a need for more diverse models of learning to be able to provide students with skills for the future. He also said that there is much to celebrate from publications from the Economy side of Scottish Government about universities as keys to economic growth which is highly reflected in the National Strategy for Economic Transformation and the Innovation Strategy. He spoke briefly about the Tuffee Entrepreneurial Campus report which he believes has the right overall emphasis for universities to support the entrepreneurial mindset of their students.

Mr Sim continued by discussing the opportunities the sector sees for the Withers Review and reform agenda. As there are many different strategies that have been published, the higher education sector believes that it would be beneficial for the Scottish Government to join the thinking on them together where appropriate to create a coherent set of policies to support universities' contribution. He highlighted that universities are hubs for economic growth and thus, it is worthwhile to invest in the capacity of universities to continue to provide the skills and talent to drive the economy and individuals' success.

Moving further into his presentation, Mr Sim concluded by foreshadowing the risks that the Withers Review and post-school reforms could include, dependent on how they are implemented. He raised concerns relating to the proposed single post-school funding body and how this would optimally work as universities e.g. whether it would support universities' research and innovation excellence and whether it would sufficiently support the contribution of small specialist institutions.. He also stated that universities have faced real-terms cuts since 2014 and are concerned that the establishment of a single funding body/ funding model could erode this further – and

that there was a risk that Scottish Government would look to unfunded 'reform' as a way of further cutting the costs of higher education.

### **Ms Shona Struthers, Chief Executive, Colleges Scotland**

Ms Struthers began her presentation by agreeing with Mr Sim that universities and colleges do work closely together and should continue this during the implementation of the reform agenda. She also emphasised that colleges and universities are not in competition with one another but are collaborative and have routes to education and learning in their own rights.

Looking at the Withers Review, Ms Struthers stated that colleges broadly welcome the review but continue to have concerns surrounding some of the recommendations and implementation process. She highlighted that college Principals work with over 80 different pots of money that have different timescales, reportage and ringfencing requirements and thus, have concerns over the idea of a single funding body. She raised the issue of how this funding would be regulated and with each different pot of money, how the funding would reach colleges. Ms Struthers also highlighted the importance of regional learning needs across Scotland as different colleges will specialise in different areas, therefore, concerned about Withers only taking a national focus. She believes there should be nation-wide consensus along with a regional focus.

Ms Struthers continued by illustrating the issues of stability in the college sector. She explained that there is no stable platform for colleges to operate from due to a lack of investment. She also stated that no college is 100% funded by the Government and does bring in money from business activities, despite their ONS classification, showcasing the concern over the single funding body again as there is a lack of clarity over what this would mean for the sector.

She continued, stating that all learning leads to a positive outcome, showcasing the need for parity of esteem between colleges and universities. Ms Struthers also highlighted that there is a missed opportunity in the Withers Review to recognise the college sector's role on widening access as colleges have learners at all levels and there is a lack of recognition to the contribution of the college sector in creating access to opportunity. Ms Struthers concluded her presentation by outlining the need for further investment in colleges so they can continue to provide skills for the future and a skilled workforce, which will underpin the implementation of the Withers Review.

### **Professor Alastair Robertson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Learning and Teaching, Glasgow Caledonian University**

Professor Robertson opened his presentation with a brief description of Glasgow Caledonian University and the demographic profile of its students, highlighting that a significant number of students are the first in their family to go to university and a key strategic priority for the University is to improve the life chances of all its students and their employability. He stated that Glasgow Caledonian is above SFC targets for widening access admissions with over 1,000 SIMD20 admissions, equalling 22% of admissions, above the 16% sector wide target. He also stated that the university combines a strong commitment to widening access with achieving excellent student outcomes, as evidenced by the results of the graduate outcomes survey with the proportion of graduates from Glasgow Caledonian going into highly skilled jobs and the level of their salaries.

Continuing, Professor Robertson spoke about graduate apprenticeship programmes at Glasgow Caledonian and the skills that these bring to the students. He stated that Glasgow Caledonian is Scotland's largest graduate apprenticeship provider and all apprenticeships are delivered through blended learning, allowing flexibility for learners. Professor Robertson illustrated that graduate apprenticeships have been growing in recent years with over 370 learners enrolling in graduate apprenticeships for academic year 2023/24, up 100 from the last academic year and over 250 employers are committed to the graduate apprenticeship programmes for this academic year. The University has also seen an increase in mature learners looking to upskill and reskill through graduate apprenticeships.

Following on from this, Professor Robertson provided an insight into the teaching of graduate apprenticeships with industry-experienced lecturers, providing students with industry-based knowledge and experience. This will provide learners with the most relevant and up to date skills for their chosen graduate apprenticeship, ensuring their skillset is ready for the workplace. Professor Robertson went on to explain how the graduate apprenticeship programmes are taught. He shared that graduate apprenticeships are largely made up of practice-based components and are regulated by professional bodies, as appropriate, to ensure they meet the changing skill set of the workplace.

Professor Robertson concluded his presentation by looking back at the Withers Review and how graduate apprenticeships support the framework of the review by providing graduates with futureproof skills. He emphasised that a change in the current set of frameworks of graduate apprenticeships would be welcome, as they are currently quite restrictive; expansion and greater flexibility could provide more options for learners, institutions and employers. He also stated that the need for greater funding for graduate apprenticeships if the Scottish Government wishes to see the model succeed, due to the rising demand and cost of technologies to train learners.

## **Ms Audrey Cumberford, Principal and Chief Executive, Edinburgh College**

Ms Cumberford began her presentation by outlining there is a lot of potential and opportunity within the Withers Review and the reform agenda but there is some challenges and frustrations felt by the college sector. She emphasised that there is significant risk in the reform agenda if the published strategies are not looked at together to create coherence within the sector. Looking more so at the Withers Review, Ms Cumberford highlighted the fundamental question that Withers asks – what does a successful skills system look like? She stated that everyone is asking the same question and how the sector should respond to the skills needs of the region and the nation.

Ms Cumberford continued by highlighting that there must be a focus on local skills policy along with national priorities. She echoed Ms Struthers regarding the varying skills needs on a regional basis.. Ms Cumberford portrayed that Edinburgh College works closely with the four universities and three local authorities in the region, to understand Edinburgh's skills future, needs and demand and how this must be interpreted for the successful future of skills.

Ms Cumberford stated that there must be systems for sustained collaboration for colleges as part of the reform agenda. Colleges work closely with businesses to provide upskilling, re-skilling and creating co-provisions for students to gain industry experience. She also stated that this will encourage lifelong learning which must be included within the Withers Review and reform agenda to continue to upskill and reskill Scotland's workforce and provide skills for the future.

Ms Cumberford then spoke about the concerns surrounding a single funding body. She explained that in her view, a single funding body will need careful consideration to be able to deliver a coherent or sensible funding system across the college sector. She discussed that the college sector was reformed thirteen years ago, to be a more coherent and regional body for education and skills aligned with regional need, highlighting that a regional approach to how colleges are funded would be welcome. She conveyed all colleges operate differently to a different skill need and so, cannot be funded through a single funding body with one model of distributing funding.

Ms Cumberford concluded her presentation by outlining the current skills system and how it is not sustainable for the day-to-day survival of colleges and how colleges need hope and clarity for a more sustainable skills system, which she hopes to see within the reform agenda and the Withers Review.

## **Question and Answer**

Ms Smith thanked the speakers for their contributions and moved on to the question-and-answer session of the meeting.

**Murdo Mathison, University and College Union:**

I would like to echo the concern of all speakers regarding the single funding body and what this would look like. This must be independent of Ministers and autonomous from Government for it to work effectively. I would welcome a consultation on this so we can have our views heard on what a single funding body should look like and how it should operate.

**Francis Hooton:**

After reading the Withers Review, I don't necessarily believe that Professor Withers has completely understood the challenges within the education sector and how to resolve them. I strongly believe that any recommendations taken forward should be independent from Government to ensure they are implemented in the most effective way.

**Chris Kennedy, University of Glasgow:**

I like the idea of a joined-up parity of esteem across the higher education and further education sectors. Looking more so towards the staff that work in institutions, many of those who work in professional support cannot study at their institution despite working there. This is why lifelong learning is so important to make institutions accessible to all, including those working within it. Withers is leaning into this and pleased to see this.

## Conclusion

Ms Smith thanked the speakers for their contributions to the meeting and the membership for attending and their insightful comments on this topic.

She advised that Aimee Logan, the Secretariat of the CPG, will be in touch regarding future meetings of the CPG.