

# Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities

03 February 2022 13.00-14.00

Minute

Present

MSPs

Liz Smith MSP  
Kaukab Stewart MSP  
Michael Marra MSP  
Michelle Thomson MSP

Invited guests

Mr Jon Vincent, Glasgow Clyde College  
Mr Christopher Maguire, Mental Health Foundation  
Mr Luke Humberstone, UWS Student Union

Non-MSP Group Members

Ms Lindsey Alexander, University of St Andrews  
Dr John Blicharski, University of Dundee  
Ms Megan Brown, sparqs  
Ms Fiona Burns, Scottish Funding Council  
Prof Gary Campbell, University of the Highlands and Islands  
Ms Anna Chambers, New College Lanarkshire  
Prof Ineke De Moortel, University of St Andrews  
Mr Adam Finkel-Gates  
Ms Jenny Frost, Robert Gordon University  
Mr Liam Furby, NUS Scotland  
Ms Katie Gilbert, NUS Scotland  
Mr Tom Hall, Colleges Scotland  
Mr James Harrison, QAA Scotland  
Mr Kenny Harrison  
Mr Graeme Hendry, Skills Development Scotland  
Mr Christopher Kennedy, Unite the Union  
Dr Lauren Knight, Universities Scotland  
Prof Matthew Maciver, University of the Highlands and Islands  
Mr Murdo Mathieson, UCU Scotland  
Ms Katie McIntosh, New College Lanarkshire  
Ms Emma Roberts, Scottish Funding Council

Mr Keith Robson, The Open University in Scotland  
Mr David Siddle, Scottish Parliament  
Mr Boab Thomson, Universities Scotland  
Mr Stuart Tooley, University of Edinburgh  
Ms Gemma Wilson, Audit Scotland

## Apologies

Mr Alastair Delaney, QAA Scotland  
Mr Matt Francis, University of Stirling  
Dr Judith McClure  
Ms Suzy Powell, Interface

## Welcome and introduction

The Convener welcomed everyone to the second meeting of the group in session six of the Scottish Parliament.

After outlining virtual meeting etiquette, the Convener introduced the topic of student mental health and introduced the speakers: Mr Christopher Maguire, Senior Research Officer, Mental Health Foundation; Mr Luke Humberstone, Vice President, UWS Student Union; Mr Alastair Sim, Director, Universities Scotland; and Mr Jon Vincent, Principal, Glasgow Clyde College.

## Presentations

### **Christopher Maguire, Mental Health Foundation**

Mr Maguire began his presentation by providing an overview of the Thriving Learners study into student mental health which was published in November 2021. The initial idea for the survey came from Universities Scotland's Mental Health and Wellbeing working group chaired by Professor Pamela Gillies.

The self-selecting student-facing survey was undertaken between January and April 2021, during the second national COVID-19 lockdown, to better understand the current state of student mental health, what support is available, what works, and what is still needed. Nearly three-quarters (73.5%) of respondents reported low wellbeing and the survey also found that more than one third of university students surveyed (36%) reported moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression. Furthermore, nearly half of respondents (45%) reported that they had experienced a serious psychological issue that they felt needed professional help. Mr Maguire added that more than 15,128 students participated in the survey which is 6% of the total student population in Scotland.

Concluding his presentation, Mr Maguire informed members that preparation is ongoing for a similar study to be conducted in the College sector in the coming weeks.

## **Mr Luke Humberstone, UWS Union**

Mr Humberstone began his presentation by stating that there is a crisis in student mental health in Scotland. Although there are many reasons for this crisis, Mr Humberstone cited lack of money and financial pressures as the main cause of poor wellbeing in the student population.

Moving on to discuss recent research by NUS Scotland, Mr Humberstone said the average annual rent for purpose-built student accommodation in Scotland reached £6,853 in 2021/22, a 34% increase on pre-Covid levels. He added that average annual rents stand at £6,853 which accounts for 88% of the maximum student loan of £7,750, leaving students with £22.42 per week. For students receiving the minimum financial package, the average rent is 144% of the available loan. These exorbitant prices are forcing students to choose between paying rent and putting food on the table. Mr Humberstone then added that the situation is not helped by the fact that student support is only available during term time, leaving many students with no income during the summer months.

Concluding his presentation, Mr Humberstone stated that students in Scotland aren't thriving; they are surviving. Many students are forced to make difficult choices: whether to pay rent or eat; or whether to go to a lecture or go to work

## **Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland**

Mr Sim began by offering apologies on behalf of Professor Pamela Gillies who was due to speak at the meeting but was taken ill at the short notice.

Mr Sim informed members that university leaders are very concerned with the findings of the Thriving Learners survey and are committed to enhancing and improving mental health and wellbeing support for students. He added that the findings had been sobering for the sector.

Discussing the response to the survey, Mr Sim informed members of the recommendation on improving referrals between universities and their local NHS health boards for students experiencing acute mental health challenges. He added that Professor Gillies met with Higher Education Minister Jamie Hepburn in January 2022 to discuss how these pathways can be improved. That meeting was very constructive and Mr Hepburn committed Scottish Government officials to working together with the sector to identify best practice on referral pathways with a view to implementing across the entire sector.

Mr Sim then informed members that Universities Scotland would shortly convene a roundtable discussion between key stakeholders on how to reduce student poverty which would include discussion on food insecurity. He added that this is in recognition of the impact of financial pressure on mental health and wellbeing.

Concluding his presentation, Mr Sim said that most of what universities do to support students is funded from core teaching grants. This funding has eroded in real terms by £1000 per student since 2014/15. The most recent Scottish Budget further cuts

university funding which will impact on the ability to offer much-needed support to students.

### **Jon Vincent, Glasgow Clyde College**

Mr Vincent began his presentation by informing members that colleges have developed greater support services as a result of additional funding from the Scottish Government. The sector received £20m to fund mental health counsellors from 2019/20 through to 2022/23 as well as additional funding from Covid consequentials amounting to just under £6m.

Mr Vincent then moved on to discuss examples of colleges' innovative approaches to mental health support. Across the sector there is widespread use of technology to offer both remote and 24/7 support for students. Due to restrictions on campus, therapeutic services moved to video conferencing and research has shown that is a successful way to do those interventions.

Discussing the impact of investment, Mr Vincent said that colleges have recruited an additional 24 mental health counsellors. Waiting lists for counselling appointments have grown by 60% whilst waiting times for appointments have reduced by 24%. However, Mr Vincent warned that this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of demand. Furthermore, students are presenting with increasingly severe and complex needs and the return to campus is expected to further increase demand.

## **Discussion and questions**

### **Chris Kennedy, Unite the Union**

Mr Kennedy commented that remote learning provides students with a certain degree of flexibility which might be lost with the return to campus. He asked the presenters how the right balance between remote and in-person learning could be achieved.

Luke Humberstone said the asynchronous side of learning during the pandemic has been welcomed by some students, for example students with caring responsibilities or those with disabilities. He added that it is important that universities and colleges retain some degree of flexibility in regards to learning post-pandemic.

### **Murdo Mathieson, UCU Scotland**

Mr Mathieson raised the Thriving Learners report and asked where it fits in with previous work on student mental health in Scotland and whether any progress has been made on improving support for students.

Chris Maguire said that the Thriving Learners survey was the first of its kind in Scotland so an appropriate benchmark does not exist. However, he added that he sees this data as establishing a baseline which will then be referred back to in a few years to ascertain whether improvements have been made.

Luke Humberstone said that he recalls giving a presentation on student mental health in 2018 and at that time there was a very small number of counsellors in colleges. He added that it is really positive to see the progress that has been made through the additional investment in the sector. However, he added that the level of investment from the Scottish Government is not adequate to allow universities and colleges to provide the right level of support for students.

**Liz Smith MSP, Scottish Parliament**

Ms Smith asked whether there is a particularly high incidence of mental health challenges among people entering further and higher education.

Luke Humberstone replied that whilst he can't say definitively whether there is a higher incidence among first years, he does see a wide range of issues being presented by those who enter higher education from school. He added that the transition from college to university is another pathway that can be particularly challenging for some students.

Chris Maguire said that the Mental Health Foundation has not yet analysed the Thriving Learners data by year of study but that the age breakdown suggests younger students are suffering more from complex mental health issues.

**Dates of future meetings in the next parliamentary year.**

The Convener advised that given the easing of Omicron restrictions, it is very likely that the CPG will be able to meet in-person for the next meeting. She added that Universities Scotland staff will be in touch in the next month with details on the next meeting and will confirm whether it will go ahead in person or virtually.