

Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities

14th June 2022, 1pm-2pm

Minute of meeting

Present

MSPs

Ms Liz Smith MSP (Convener)

Ms Maggie Chapman MSP

Mr Michael Marra MSP

Invited guests

Ms Anne-Marie Sturrock, Vice Principal (Student Experience) at Borders College

Professor John Sawkins, Deputy Principal (Learning and Teaching) at Heriot-Watt University

Professor Moira Fischbacher-Smith, Vice Principal (Learning and Teaching) at University of Glasgow

Non-MSP Group Members

Ms Aimee Logan, Universities Scotland

Mr Blair Grubb, University of Dundee

Ms Emma Slavin, Skills Development Scotland

Mr Gavin McWhinnie, Office of Liz Smith MSP

Mr James Harrison, Quality Assurance Agency

Ms Joanne Buchan, Colleges Scotland

Mr John Blicharski, University of Dundee

Mr Keith Robson, Open University

Ms Kirsty Conlon, Universities Scotland

Mr Locran Owens, University of Edinburgh

Ms Lorna Rofe, Audit Scotland

Mr Matthew MacIver, University of Highlands and Islands

Mr Murdo Mathison, University and College Union

Mr Nathan Tyler, West College Scotland

Ms Noele McClelland, Thorntons Law

Ms Steph Black, Sparqs

Ms Susannah Lane, Universities Scotland

Mr Terry Brotherstone, University of Aberdeen

Mr William Hardie, Robert Gordon University

Apologies

Mr Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland

Ms Clare Adamson MSP, Scottish Parliament

Ms Jane Scott, Queen Margaret University

Ms Kaukab Stewart MSP, Scottish Parliament (Deputy Convener)

Mr Kenny Harrison, University of the Highlands and Islands

Ms Megan Brown, Sparqs

Ms Michelle Thomson MSP, Scottish Parliament
Mr Neil Croll, University of Glasgow
Mr Paul Little, City of Glasgow College
Ms Veronica Lynch, Perth College University of the Highlands and Islands

Welcome and Introduction

Ms Smith welcomed everyone to the meeting and informed members that from September, meetings will be back to in-person. She contextualised the importance that the Parliament and MSPs place of the topic of enhancing and maintaining academic excellence in further and higher education. She informed members they would hear from three speakers: Professor Moira Fischbacher-Smith, Professor John Sawkins and Ms Anne-Marie Sturrock.

Presentations

Professor Moira Fischbacher-Smith, Vice Principal (Learning and Teaching) at University of Glasgow.

Professor Fischbacher-Smith began her presentation by outlining the areas she would cover: the challenges faced due to covid in online learning, the student experience during this time and adaptations to quality assurance and enhancement at the University of Glasgow. Professor Fischbacher-Smith spoke about departmental reviews that were moved online to ensure courses were being delivered effectively. Academic teams received a blanket temporary approval for courses that had to change during the pandemic which were subject to approval on the condition that aims and learning outcomes of courses were not disrupted. She continued speaking of course improvements at Glasgow, where they obtained student feedback through a new student survey. Professor Fischbacher-Smith then spoke of external examiners, where she highlighted that a particular focus during 2019/2020, across the sector, was the no detriment policy (where a student would not receive a lower degree outcome than they were on track for due to the challenges and changes in teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic). She outlined challenges facing assessments; where untested changes had to be made across all disciplines and universities. Changes included: exam format, duration with 24 hour exams, online guidance, practice sites to download and upload exams. Consideration was also given to the student experience where it became clear that not all students had appropriate study environments or unlimited access to broadband. 24 hour exam helpdesks were set up and have been mainstreamed. Further challenges faced by students included: students being in different time zones due to lockdowns, the impact of isolation on mental health. Another issue highlighted included students making friends and the impact on student life where students are now finding it difficult to engage with peers and student activities.

Professor John Sawkins, Deputy Principal (Learning and teaching) at Heriot-Watt University.

Professor Sawkins began his presentation by outlining what academic excellence and quality is in higher education, talking to the sector's enhancement approach and how that applies in his institution. Enhancement complements quality assurance but also goes beyond it. He highlighted the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) in Scotland and shared the five components of QEF which help share good practice across the sector and improve the student learning experience. One such

component is the different enhancement themes that run on an annual basis. The current enhancement theme, running from 2020-23, is resilient learning communities, which Professor Sawkins noted was very timely given the circumstances created by the pandemic. Professor Sawkins conveyed that the sector will always enhance what they do and actively look for enhancement through the themes and QEF. He stated that the enhancement approach allows for collaboration across the sector and with students as a partner, and the sharing of expertise and good practice across the sector. He focused on Heriot-Watt University where across delivery of the enhancement themes across five campuses (in Scotland and internationally) allow for students to learn, provide creativity and innovation and embeds a culture of enhancement. As an example of Heriot-Watt's approach to the resilient learning communities enhancement theme, the University has been developing resilient pedagogies to create an accessible maths-based resource to enhance how students learn and can be further supported.

Anne-Marie Sturrock, Vice Principal (Student Experience) at Borders College.

Ms Sturrock focused her presentation on academic excellence in further education through a Virtual Reality (VR) learning project at Borders College. She highlighted that this was a response to the national Digital Health and Care Strategy and the skills gap within some workforces, primarily in social care. This meant there was a need to create a different learning environment for students who were coming into to work in care. Ms Sturrock continued by stating that her College has agreed one subject where enhancement of learning was required: dementia care. The result was providing a safe space for students to learn in before the transition from college to the workplace. This enhanced communication and other skills for people who worked with VR also worked well, it formed part of the performance criteria of the Social Care HNC course. Colleges decided to share this idea of learning with six colleges taking on VR training on a thematic basis within a subject area. She articulated the benefits that VR has brought to students' learning including collaboration between colleges and universities, mutual benefits for students and care-receivers as students have had more hands-on learning and parity of learning.

Question and Answer Session

The Convener thanked the speakers and welcomed any questions from the group.

Mr Murdo Mathison, University and College Union:

What are your views on the Scottish Funding Council's recommendation for a single framework for quality assurance enhancement in higher education and further education?

- Professor John Sawkins: The current quality framework is dynamic and will adjust and evolve over time as we continuously learn. There are benefits that both HE and FE can gain from learning from each other and there is an openness to that.
- Professor Moira Fischbacher-Smith: Advised that she was a member of the SFC's working group for the framework. She noted that the work was trying to focus on a set of core principles and themes that matter to FE and HE, with the enhancement approach a priority within that. She was clear that there can be no one size fits all approach and standardisation across the piece would not be helpful to anyone but there is a shared commitment to the importance of partnership between each other and students.

- Ms Anne-Marie Sturrock: Advised that she is also on the working group. She welcomed the openness of the framework as one size does not fit all. She is interested in the sharing of approaches to a new framework which is going well.

Ms Maggie Chapman MSP:

How does staff morale and academic excellence interact with each other, and what is staff engagement in quality assurance and excellence programmes like?

- Professor Moira Fischbacher-Smith: Advised that this is a very positive interaction as academic and professional services staff are motivated to deliver academic excellence for their students. Staff have been working extra hard over the last two years in response to all of the challenges of the pandemic. Engagement around discussion on how to achieve academic excellence begins with the person leading the course where they would put their own research and thinking in consultation with different stakeholders.
- Professor John Sawkins: Staff join the sector because they want to do a good job and be there for students. They want to work in a place where enhancement is well regarded. Challenges include the amount of paperwork, which should be minimised as it shouldn't be so demanding that it becomes a distraction from delivering for the students.
- Ms Anne-Marie Sturrock: Quality process is great to have to engage with stakeholders. Keep it simple and keep staff engaged.

Ms Liz Smith MSP:

How challenging it is for institutions to accurately assess applicant potential in UCAS applications to university given the lack of formal examinations experience that senior phase students have now because of the impact of the pandemic?

- Professor John Sawkins: The excellent relationships universities have with schools and colleges and our long track record of working with UCAS gives us sufficient background that we are able to deal with the UCAS applications as they are coming through in a consistent way across time. Higher exams had to be switched off but universities did not work in a void as schools were still able to assess students and supply this through to us. Will have to work hard in the next 2-3 years to support students. We will have to spot gaps and provide support in these gaps, but this is what we do, the system was not switched off and did not fail to work.
- Professor Moira Fischbacher-Smith: One of the biggest challenges students face when entering university is a lack of self-confidence because of the disruption to their studies and lack of exam practice. As universities, we need to offer reassurance to students that they have their university place on merit and scaffold that experience with the right support and practical study skills to rebuild confidence.
- Ms Anne-Marie Sturrock: I have seen students enjoy being back on campus and enjoy the other side of the college life which is the friendships and socialisation. Colleges have begun to slowly build assessments back in as we have students who may never have taken a closed book assessment in over two years. Our approach to assessment going forward is to build the student's confidence to get back into this way of learning again.

Conclusion

Ms Smith thanked the speakers on behalf of members within the meeting. She stated how interesting it was to hear about the challenges faced by colleges and universities and emphasised the importance of academic excellence being maintained and enhanced. Ms Smith extended her thanks and the CPG's thanks to both colleges and universities for everything they have done throughout the pandemic to support students.

Ms Smith highlighted that after recess, in September, the cross-party group would resume in-person meetings in the Parliament. She reminded members that if they have any topic suggestions for future meetings to feed this back to her.