

## **Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities**

28<sup>th</sup> September 2022, 1pm-2pm

Minute of meeting

### **Present**

MSPs

Ms Liz Smith MSP (Convener), Scottish Parliament

Ms Maggie Chapman MSP, Scottish Parliament

Invited guests

Ms Ellie Gomersall, President of the National Union of Students Scotland

Ms Jill Stevenson, Dean of Equality and Diversity and the University of Stirling

Ms Lydia Rohmer, Principal and Chief Executive of West Highland College

Non-MSP Group Members

Ms Aimee Logan, Universities Scotland

Mr Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland

Mr Andy Whitty, Colleges Scotland

Ms Caroline Bysh, Scotland's Rural College

Dr Daniel Kennan, University of Glasgow

Ms Emma Shea, University of Dundee

Mr Francis Hooton

Mr Gavin McWhinnie, Office of Liz Smith MSP

Ms Jane Scott, Queen Margaret University

Dr Jessica Lindholm, Queen Margaret University

Mr Keith Robson, Open University

Ms Letita Friary, Edinburgh Napier University

Ms Lindsey Alexander, University of St Andrews

Mr Lorcan Mullen, Unison

Ms Lynn McMath, University of Edinburgh

Ms Mary Senior, University and Colleges Union

Professor Mathew McIver, University of the Highlands and Islands

Mr Nathan Tyler, West College Scotland

Mr Philip Bale, University of Aberdeen

Ms Rebecca Scarlett, Lead

Mr Ross Burns, Edinburgh Napier University

Ms Susannah Lane, Universities Scotland

Mr Thomas Feige, Edinburgh Napier University

Ms Valentine Morgan, Robert Gordon University

### **Apologies**

Mr Alastair Delaney, Quality Assurance Agency

Professor Blair Grubb, University of Dundee

Ms Fiona Burns, Scottish Funding Council

Professor John Blicharski, University of Dundee  
Ms Kaukab Stewart MSP, Scottish Parliament  
Ms Lorna Duncan, Scottish Funding Council  
Mr Michael Marra MSP, Scottish Parliament  
Ms Michelle Thomson MSP, Scottish Parliament  
Mr Neill Croll, University of Glasgow  
Mr Stuart Tooley, University of Edinburgh  
Ms Suzy Powell, Interface Online  
Professor Todd Walker, University of the Highlands and Islands  
Mr William Hardie, Robert Gordon University

## **Welcome and Introduction**

Ms Smith welcomed everyone to the first in person meeting of the CPG since the pandemic. She thanked everyone taking part in the meetings when they were online. Ms Smith noted the apologies for this meeting. She continued by outlining the rules and regulations of the CPG, contextualising the AGM.

Ms Smith passed over to Mr Alastair Sim to chair the elections for Convener and Vice Convener of the group. Ms Smith indicated her wish to continue as Convener which the group approved. Michael Marra MSP indicated his wish to become Vice Convener of the group which the group approved. Mr Sim passed back to Ms Smith who chaired the election for Secretariat of the group. Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland indicated their wish to continue as Secretariat which the group approved. Ms Smith finished the elections by highlighting the MSP membership of the group.

She contextualised the importance of the topic the group would be discussing, the cost of living crisis among students. She informed members they would hear from three speakers: Ms Ellie Gomersall, Ms Lydia Rohmer and Ms Jill Stevenson.

## **Presentations**

### **Ms Ellie Gomersall, President of the National Union of Students Scotland (NUSS).**

Ms Gomersall began her presentation by relaying the research context from NUSS's report BROKE where they surveyed students in 2021. Ms Gomersall continued by highlighting that this report was produced prior to the cost of living crisis. She outlined facts and figures from this report where 60% of all surveyed worry and stress about money frequently, 1/3 have considered dropping out of their course due to financial worries. She said that widening access students would be disproportionately affected by worrying about money. Ms Gomersall furthered this point by conveying that there are no SAAS payments over the summer for students which leads to further money worries as 80% of all surveyed find it difficult over the summer. She continued by stating that many students rely on commercial debt, bank overdrafts and parental financial support as there is inadequate financial support over the summer. Due to this, many students have to find work and put their studies second with 68% of students working more than 10 hours per week. She then made the point that 12% of all students have experienced homelessness during their studies which is 4x the rate of the average population's homelessness. Ms Gomersall again highlighted that this survey was taken prior to the cost of living crisis which has now seen a worsening situation and so made asks from the Scottish Government: a support rise for students, immediate increase in grants and bursaries and rent controls

to cover all forms of student accommodation. She continued by raising the issue of transport as many students are not under 22 and so do not qualify for free bus travel with 1/3 of students skipping classes as they cannot afford transport. She also asked for a discount on peak travel.

### **Ms Jill Stevenson, Dean of Equality and Diversity at the University of Stirling**

Ms Stevenson began her presentation by highlighting there are increased financial pressures being faced by students such as increased energy prices, travel costs and food inflation as examples. Ms Stevenson referenced the Thriving Learners Report produced by Mental Health Foundation and partners where 15,000 students responded. She outlined statistics from the report where 22% of respondents were worried about running out of food and one third ate less due to a lack of money. Ms Stevenson continued by stating that student loans and bursaries are not enough with the average cost per year for a student equating to £10,000 but the highest financial support available to students per year is £8,000. Despite this, hardship funds are being cut and students are continuing to suffer. Due to this, students are accessing food banks and commercial debt, particularly over summer as a result of the lack of funding over summer. Ms Stevenson continued her presentation by raising student mental health. Ms Stevenson once again referred to the Thriving Learners Report where one third of respondents reported having severe or moderate symptoms of depression during their studies.

Ms Stevenson continued her presentation by conveying what universities are doing help students during this crisis including laptop loans for students who cannot afford a laptop do complete their studies, reduce travel costs by moving submissions of work online, opening up suitable jobs to students for additional income alongside their studies and reducing the cost of graduations for students alongside many other initiatives. She illustrated that this is not just an issue that faces students but is a societal wide issue and so called on the Scottish Government to implement changes to mitigate this crisis. She called on the Scottish Government to ensure the student support scheme is fit for purpose, increase the loan and grant amount, provide energy packages that all students can benefit from and ensure students are thought of in the upcoming budget.

### **Ms Lydia Rohmer, Principal and Chief Executive of West Highland College**

Ms Rohmer began her presentation by highlighting the cohort of students who study at colleges. Ms Rohmer outlined that 213,000 people study at colleges across Scotland every year of all different age ranges. She continued by stating that 20% of all school leavers choose to study at college with 40% of those studying at college being from the most deprived backgrounds. Ms Rohmer illustrated the summer funding gap for college students and how students struggle during these months, particularly those from SIMD20 backgrounds. She reiterated that this is a crisis on top of another crisis with the pressures of covid still being prevalent within society and the cost of living crisis worsening the situation for students. She continued by stating what colleges do to help students during this crisis: direct financial support and discretionary funding, food bank vouchers, appliance help, multi-model classes to reduce travel costs and much more. She furthered this point by portraying four key cases studies throughout the college sector to help students mitigate the cost of living crisis.

Ms Rohmer illustrated that there is a higher demand from students for mental health support. However, there has not been an increase in mental health funding support for colleges and the continuity of the funding remaining unknown. Ms Rohmer also made asks of the Scottish Government during her presentation. These asks included keeping access flexible and open to university so people studying at college can gain easy access to higher education, increased funding for student hardship and create sustainable career pathways for those in study.

### **Question and Answer Session**

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

#### **Ms Liz Smith MSP, Scottish Parliament:**

Is there any specific data on students in first and second year who are attending colleges or universities?

- Ms Ellie Gomersall: I currently have no specific data on this at the moment.

#### **Ms Mary Senior, Universities and Colleges Union:**

What impact is the cost of living crisis going to have on progression and widening access targets?

- Ellie Gomersall: This is a very important question. This cohort of students are at risk of dropping out of education due to increased financial pressures where they are disproportionately affected. These students want to go to university and college as this is not just about the learning but also the social aspects and gaining experience.
- Jill Stevenson: I echo what Ellie has just said. Access for these students to enter into higher and further education has been difficult and would be a great downfall if access for these students became limited.
- Lydia Rohmer: The pandemic has also had an impact on these student outcomes. There has been a direct knock-on affect to widening access students progressing to university from college. We do have staff to support these students within colleges, but they have also been directly impacted by the pandemic and the cost of living crisis which does limit their availability of support.

#### **Keith Robson, Open University in Scotland:**

At the Open University, we have 22,000 students and are the fourth largest institution by student numbers in the United Kingdom. Most of our students study part-time and so do not receive enough financial support. There was a review to take place on student loans and bursaries, but I have not heard anything further on this review. Would you be open to supporting a review of the bursary and loan schemes to extend to part time students?

- Jill Stevenson: Yes of course. We must support all cohorts across higher and further education.
- Lydia Rohmer: I fully endorse this.
- Ellie Gomersall: I echo what has been said. Carers and parents are more likely to be part time students and so we must support them. Also, part-time students have to pay full council tax and are not entitled to the same benefits that full-time students are.

**Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland**

I am disappointed that nothing further has been done following the review on student loans and bursaries.

**Conclusion**

Ms Smith thanked the speakers on behalf of members within the meeting. She stated that she will look into alternating meetings in person and online and encouraged members if they have any strong view on this to get in touch. Ms Smith concluded the meeting by highlighting the CPG's end of year report which will be circulated and asked members to provide any feedback or comments if they so wish before being published on the Scottish Parliament's website.