

# Cross-Party Group on Colleges and Universities

Thursday 6 June 2024 1pm

Minute

Present

MSPs

Liz Smith MSP

Audrey Nicoll MSP

Invited guests

1. Peter Bain, President, School Leaders Scotland.
2. Liz Connolly, Principal and Chief Executive, West College Scotland.
3. Theo Smith, Student, Edinburgh Napier University.
4. Dr Jessica Lindohf, Head of Student Services, Queen Margaret University

Non-MSP Group Members

Aimee Logan, Universities Scotland

Andy Witty, Colleges Scotland

Deborah Smith, UNISON

Frances Johnson, University of Edinburgh

Francis Hooton

Graeme Henry, Skills Development Scotland

Jane Scott, Queen Margaret University

Jason Miles-Campbell, Jisc

Joanne Buchan, Colleges Scotland

Jon Gray, City of Glasgow College

Kathryn O'Loan, Quality Assurance Agency

Keith Robson, Open University in Scotland

Lauren Wards, Universities Scotland

Lynne Raeside, Scottish Funding Council

Mary Senior, Universities and Colleges Union

Matthew MacIver, University of the Highlands and Islands

Michael McDaid, Skills Development Scotland

Niall McGeechan, NUS Scotland

Rachel Treglown, Universities Scotland

Ray Buist, Audit Scotland

Sarah Kilpatrick, Scottish Funding Council

Sinead Griffin, Scottish Funding Council  
Thomas Feige, Edinburgh Napier University  
Tom Hall, Colleges Scotland

## Apologies

Alastair Delaney, Quality Assurance Agency  
Professor Blair Grubb, University of Dundee  
Claire McPherson, Universities Scotland  
Georgia Marks, UCAS  
Gillian McElroy, University of the West of Scotland  
Professor Graeth Miles, University of St Andrews  
Grant Jarvie, University of Edinburgh  
Professor John Blicharski, University of Dundee  
Lindsey Aleander, University of St Andrews  
Susannah Lane, Universities Scotland  
Suzy Powell, Interface Online  
William Hardie, Robert Gordon University

## Welcome and Introduction

Ms Smith welcomed everyone to the meeting. She introduced the topic of the meeting, the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic on students and the student experience.

## Presentations

### **Peter Bain, President, School Leaders Scotland.**

Mr Bain opened his presentation by highlighting every learner in Scotland has approximately 64 days of lost learning due to the pandemic. He outlined that schools are seeing lower attendance rates with a minimum drop of 5% in pupils attending school across all schools and a lack of resilience, along with continued mental health concerns for students. He also stated that there is:

- Lack of motivation to learn
- Struggle with transition to online learning
- Surge in anxiety, depression and other mental health issues

Schools are supporting these pupils, but require additional resources from NHS, social work and the third sector in supporting these pupils. There has also been decreased numbers of pupils attending school after fourth year, suggesting a shift in priorities since the pandemic.

Mr Bain went on to address the economic impact of the pandemic. Since the pandemic, there has been an increased need for free school meals and an increase in those accessing Pupil Equity Funding – highlighting the widening gap in education equity and the need for sustained support for vulnerable pupils.

He concluded that there has been a shift in teaching styles for pupils at school, which have been difficult and complex, impacting pupils across Scotland. He suggested

there is a vital need for reform to combat this as discussed in the Muir, Hayward Withers and Morgan reviews.

**Liz Connolly, Principal and Chief Executive, West College Scotland.**

Ms Connolly began her presentation by reflecting on the pandemic and the inability to plan for what was to come. She outlined that the college sector responded by establishing a new way of learning for their students, providing an emergency online delivery to ensure students could continue learning. More vulnerable students were offered extra support, including access to devices and data to tackle digital poverty, and were prioritised for opportunities for in-person learning where possible.

She continued by speaking about the impact on learning. Some courses (such as dance, construction) cannot be taught online, creating additional challenges as students transitioned to online learning. This transition left many students feeling socially isolated as they could not meet in person, make friends and receive the full college experience.

Ms Connolly highlighted that since the pandemic, there has been an increased demand in mental health support and continues to increase, despite mental health counsellor funding being removed by the Scottish Government. The high demand for counsellors is reflected in the fact they are increasingly booked one year in advance, from the start of the academic year.

**Theo Smith, Student, Edinburgh Napier University.**

Theo introduced himself as a student who in fifth year of high school left home to find a safe place to live. Then in March 2020, exams were cancelled due to the pandemic and he left high school feeling unprepared for university. Due to pandemic restrictions Theo experienced social isolation as classes were all virtual and he was unable to meet classmates or peers. This transition to independent learning was very difficult.

Following the introduction of in person blended learning, Theo did not feel connected to those studying with him or the university and was left with no support network.

As the pandemic progressed, he began to struggle financially however the university helped support him through bursaries. They also supported him by providing study strategies and discussing best ways to study adapted to his learning style.. He feels the support he received at university has been exceptional in overcoming the legacy of the pandemic. Theo is now a Widening Participation Student Ambassador to ensure others receive the same support he received.

**Dr Jessica Lindohf, Head of Student Services, Queen Margaret University**

Dr Lindohf began her presentation by outlining how the pandemic disrupted both education and the student experience. This was done through; lack of exam practice, attendance issues, sensitivity to criticism, lack of independent experience, lack of critical thinking, less socialising in groups and challenges in making social connections – all accredited to the changes that had to take place due to the pandemic and social isolation.

The university has noted an increased need for disability services. Figures show that in 2019-20, there were 18.5% of students accessing disability services which increased to 26.7% in 2022-23. This includes an increased number of students accessing mental health services, and presenting with mental health issues and neurodivergency. She stated that around 15% of students engage with mental health services while at university, with a year on year increase for those needing mental health support. This has increased from 3.9% in 2020-2021 to 8.1% in 2022-23, the most up to date statistics.

Dr Lindohf proceeded to highlight the social challenges and financial struggles of students following the pandemic. There has been an increased number of students accessing hardship funding and seeking financial help, and a higher number undertaking work while studying.

She concluded that the support universities provide to their students following the pandemic with increased pressure on services is not sustainable, calling for increased funding to support students.

## Question and Answer

Mary Senior, Universities and Colleges Union

I am very concerned regarding the cuts in mental health counsellors and overall funding for universities, expecting them to do more with less such as increased support for students. Students are now more eager and likely to make complaints when they are not satisfied, leaving the universities and colleges open to significant detrimental impact while doing what they can with the funding available.

Francis Hooton

You have mentioned that the student experience has had a detrimental impact due to the pandemic, why do you think this is?

Dr Jessica Lindohf, Queen Margaret University

University life has been impacted greatly with a decrease in social gatherings and overall fun activities that students would partake in outwith the university such as parties. This could be due to the social isolation and lack of confidence students no have in making friends.

Liz Smith MSP

What advice would you give to a younger student who is experiencing these challenges and how easy do you find it to give this advice?

Theo Smith, Edinburgh Napier University

I find it very easy as a Widening Participation Student Ambassador as I get to meet many students. I would tell them to be confident and it will make the journey a lot easier.

Andy Witty, Colleges Scotland

If people can't think critically and take criticism well and moving into the workforce, this could be very consequential in them holding down a job as this is a main aspect of working life. I believe we should ensure learners get the experience in the workplace to reintroduce these skills and ensure they are workforce ready when leaving college and university.

## Conclusion

Ms Smith closed the meeting by thanking speakers for their contribution and insightful questions from members. She stated the next meeting will be after Recess and will also be the AGM.