

CROSS PARTY GROUP (CPG) ON SCOTLAND'S UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

12.45-14.00 on 27 November 2014, Committee Room 6, Scottish Parliament

Note of Meeting

Present:

Ms Elizabeth Smith MSP	Convenor of the CPG on Scotland's Universities and Colleges
Mr George Adam MSP	Scottish Parliament
Ms Stacey Adam	Scottish Parliament
Ms Mary Scanlon MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr Lewis MacDonald MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr Hanzala Malik MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr Hugh Henry MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr David Alexander	West College Scotland
Mr David Anderson	UCU Scotland
Ms Una Bartley	Open University in Scotland
Ms Lani Baird	NUS Scotland
Ms Joanne Buchan	Colleges Scotland
Mr Terry Brotherstone	University of Aberdeen
Ms Roisin-Alana Di Giacomo	Glasgow Caledonian University
Mr John Evans	Skills Development Scotland
Mr Martin Fairbairn	Scottish Funding Council
Mr Robert Foster	NUS Scotland
Ms Moira Gibson	University of Edinburgh
Prof Grant Jarvie	University of Edinburgh
Ms Susannah Lane	Universities Scotland
Ms Sheona Lawson	EUSA
Ms Eve Lewis	SPARQS
Mr Paul Little	City of Glasgow College
Mr Finlay MacCorquodale	Edinburgh Napier University
Ms Carolyn McCole	University of Strathclyde Students' Association
Mr Murdo Mathison	UCU Scotland
Mr Kevin O'Donnell	Bellenden
Ms Jennifer Ross	Scottish Parliament
Ms Jane Scott	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh
Mr Dash Sekhar	EUSA
Ms Claire Shepherd	Thorntons Law LLP
Mr Alastair Sim	Universities Scotland
Ms Heather Sloan	Universities Scotland
Ms Sophie Walker	Scottish Parliament
Ms Claire Woodward-Nutt	Scottish Government

Apologies:

Ms Kezia Dugdale MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr Stewart Maxwell MSP	Scottish Parliament

Mr Liam McArthur MSP	Scottish Parliament
Mr Tavish Scott MSP	Scottish parliament
Mr Peter Aitchison	University of Glasgow
Mr Jamie Kerr	Thorntons Law LLP
Dr Judith McClure	SCEN
Prof Matthew McIvor	University of the Highlands and Islands
Ms Shona Struthers	Colleges Scotland
Mr Rob Wallen	North East College
Mr James Wilson	Universities Scotland

1. Welcome and introduction from the Convenor

The Convenor, Ms Elizabeth Smith MSP, welcomed everyone to the Cross Party Group on the topic ‘A new devolution settlement for Scotland and how it relates to Scotland’s colleges and universities’. Thanks were given to Joanne Buchan and Colleges Scotland for sponsoring the lunch.

The Convenor explained that the format of the meeting would be slightly different than usual – as well as having speakers from the further and higher education sectors, MSPs from each of the main parties in the Scottish Parliament would speak briefly on their party’s position in relation to the Smith Commission.

2. Apologies

Apologies were noted.

3. Introduction to the topic of “A new devolution settlement for Scotland and how it relates to Scotland’s colleges and universities”

Mr Alastair Sim, Director, Universities Scotland. *The Smith Commission: An opportunity for universities*

Mr Sim explained that Universities Scotland’s approach to its submission to the Smith Commission was as a series of ‘asks’ linked to the values at the heart of universities. They included:

- social justice and an ask for further powers to enable learners to escape from the ‘benefits trap’ and access higher education);
- economic growth (including an ask to recognise the social, cultural and economic value of high talent migration and re-instate a post–study work entitlement for international students which brought benefits to Scotland’s economy
- Economic growth and an ask for greater incentives for business investment in research and development.

Mr Sim thanked members who had supported Universities Scotland on these issues and welcomed the Smith Commission’s acknowledgement that Scotland should be able to take a different approach to immigration policy for international students (as recommended on the final page of the Smith

Commission report) . Mr Sim cautioned on the need for due diligence on the tax base generated from a change in powers in order to ensure it will generate enough to fund everything that Scotland wants to invest in. Looking beyond the Smith Commission members were informed of the higher education sector's 'asks' that relate to Scotland's existing powers including a need for there to be a commitment to funding of teaching, student support and postgraduate provision; support for the responsible autonomy of universities and academic freedom; widening access – to take a holistic and life-long learning approach to this issue; research & knowledge exchange including recognition that every university has its own distinct contribution to Scotland's research excellence.

Mr Paul Little, Principal and Chief Executive of City of Glasgow College. *A new devolution settlement and how it relates to Scotland's colleges.*

Mr Little welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the Smith Commission stating that colleges often feel invisible. There are some key issues that do impact on colleges and students and the devolution of further powers enables Scotland to address these. Colleges Scotland has delivered the Scottish Government agenda and responded positively to policy of focussing on 16-24 year olds. He advised that 71% of current college provision is now aimed at young people; one in every 25 engineers is female; a quarter of a million people rely on a college education so he agreed with the points raised by Mr Sim including:

Student support and benefits - some potential students find themselves in a 'benefits trap' as they lose all (or part) of their current housing benefits if they go to college. Lack of housing benefit, will have a huge effect for the sector and social inequality, affecting –mature and part-time learners as well as care leavers and adults with children. Devolution of housing benefit (in particular) would enable Scottish Government to review the relationship between the benefits system and student funding to create a fairer solution.

- International students – the abolition of post-study work visa in 2012 is a concern also for the college sector as it encouraged students to come to Scotland to study/work and is an important factor when choosing where to study. Four colleges now have Highly Trusted Status (HTS) but it used to be 17. There is a feeling within the college sector that the Home Office does not “get” colleges.
- Devolved tax raising powers enable Scottish Government to generate additional income from taxation. Additional revenue could be used to address the funding shortfall facing further education and enable colleges to meet the challenges and opportunities it faces including 'Developing the Young Workforce'.

Ms Mary Scanlon MSP, Scottish Conservative Party

Ms Scanlon commented that despite the publication of the Smith Commission report earlier that day it; it remained a work in progress. Ms Scanlon stated:-

- she was pleased to see that Smith had taken up many of the proposal put forward by the Strathclyde Report;
- she welcomed the mention of immigration policy in relation to further and higher education whilst recognising change in this area was always going to be difficult given UK Government policy. She wished to put on record that Scottish Conservative MSPs do not always agree with UK Government and that her Scottish Party, and leader, is prepared to be bold and acknowledge

this where it is the case including criticism of the Home Secretary's stance on matters of immigration.

- she recognised the additional complications surrounding housing benefit now that it was part of universal credit;
- her frustration that further education is sometimes overlooked.

Mr Lewis Macdonald MSP, Scottish Labour Party

Mr Lewis said that it was important to recognise this is an important step in process of change in constitution of the UK and devolution of Scotland. He also said it was important to emphasise that all five parties in Scotland had signed up to the process of the Smith Commission and agreed to accept the outcome. He cited three areas of concern:-

- Benefits – devolution of attendance allowance had been recommended but not housing benefit. More needs to be done to avoid the 'benefits trap'. He felt there is scope to create additional benefits and top up those benefits that are already. Scotland can be more flexible within existing powers to address the issues.
- Post- study entitlement – introduced by Lord McConnell (as Fresh Talent Initiative) and then taken up by Tony Blair. Labour approached Smith to ask for it to be re-instated and welcomes its mention within Smith report. Without pre-empting the Labour Party's manifesto for next year, the Party might include this.
- Due diligence on new financial arrangements will be crucial as it will change the character of the Scottish Parliament as it is now directly responsible for raising money. This is a "coming of age" moment for the Scottish Parliament.
- Important to remember that the act of devolving powers itself does not solve Scotland's problems, the challenge is to make powers work to solve problems.

Mr George Adam MSP, Scottish National Party

- Mr Adam commented that the Smith Commission was a perfect example of engagement of politics and concurred with Ms Scanlon's comment that it was the beginning and not the end.
- 85 per cent of welfare is still controlled by Westminster - the Scottish Parliament does not have wealth creating powers with corporation tax and capital gains tax controlled by Westminster.
- Mr Adam stated that we want powers here, to enable debate and make transformational change.
- Mr Adam mentioned the First Minister's announcement that there will be attainment officers within local authorities to help raise attainment levels in schools; a move which he very much welcomed. He did not want to see any Scot become a "victim" of the postcode they are born into.
- He concluded by saying that the infamous vow of further powers for Scotland has not been delivered.

4. Discussion following presentations

The Convenor thanked the speakers for their contributions and opened the floor for questions and discussion. The following issues were raised:-

Mr Sim and Mr Little were asked to what extent is constitutional change necessary to ensure higher and further education (HE and FE) institutions are world-beating?

- Alastair Sim said that it is the job of the HE sector to make the best of circumstances whatever the political landscape – it is up to individuals as to how they vote and the sector will work in whatever given constitution. The sector works for a best business environment; for learners to succeed; and will always speak up for what is best in terms of social and economic needs.
- Paul Little commented that the FE sector in Scotland has benefited from stability whereas the college sector in England changes every four or five years which leads to destabilisation. He pointed to a recent OECD report which found that England has lost its way on vocational qualifications.

Equalities and the HE Governance Bill – what will be reserved or devolved?

- Una Bartley asked Parliamentarians if they were clear what the Smith Commission had recommended in relation to devolution of equality issues and gender quotas. The Convenor advised that it was her impression, on first reading, that Smith intended Scotland to have power over gender quotas.

Student Support and widening access

- Martin Fairbairn challenged the group that there are barriers to widening access and a perception of problems with student support irrespective of devolved powers.
- Alastair Sim suggested that there was a need for much greater simplicity in funding support at postgraduate level and was concerned about the falling number of postgraduate (PG) taught students. Higher numbers of Scottish domiciled post graduate students will be an important part of building a high skilled economy.
- Paul Little pointed to cuts in college funding which had significant impact on frontline teaching services. The Scottish Government says it is still funding college students but support for bursaries is not support for teaching.
- Robert Foster commented that there needs to be a joined up approach for student support including a link to the minimum wage for students. There are powers the Scottish Government currently has that it could be using to ensure fairer bursary support for college students in a situation where some students get 80 per cent of bursary and others get the full 100%.

How to ensure Stakeholder Engagement with the Smith Commission?

- Paul Little commented that:-colleges evolve from local communities and have a huge platform to build from; they are now large and complex with a panoply of support bodies; have excellent engagement with young and not so young. He stated that because colleges are 'invisible' it is not known that they engage with 1500 employers – they 'just get on with it'
- Alastair Sim said that universities have taken the lead with economic engagement; discussed university governance and its inclusive process.

Is there scope for the HE and FE sectors to work together more closely with NUS and UCU and speak with more of a collective voice?

- Alastair Sim agreed that he would like to see this in terms of reframing the debate of lifelong learning, stating that we are all partners in promoting it. His concern is that we have got into a binary debate between colleges and universities which is not helpful to either sector. He concurred with George Adam's comment that education is stronger when we all speak with a united voice. He also referred to another important partner – schools.
- George Adam expressed agreement, and the benefit of giving evidence to the Education and Culture Committee.
- Grant Jarvie commented that the link between a highly skilled education and economic growth and reducing inequality gaps was very powerful.

5. Date and topic of next meeting

The Convenor advised that Universities Scotland would work with her office to identify the first meeting dates for early 2015 and these will be circulated before Christmas.

The Convenor invited members to let her know of suggestions for topics for discussion at future meetings, as well as any volunteers to sponsor a lunch.

The Convenor closed the meeting by thanking all for attending and for their input.