

Gordon Lindhurst MSP
Convener, Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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By email:
economy@parliament.scot

29 September 2020

Dear Convener,

Many thanks for your letter and for the opportunity to help with the Committee's inquiry. Firstly, I would direct you to the institutional response submitted by the University of Glasgow, which touches on many of the issues you raise, and which I hope members find useful.

With regard to the oral evidence the Committee received from Professor Blanchflower in August, I would say simply that universities will accept as many Scottish domiciled students with the relevant qualifications as they are funded to – and always seek to be as flexible as possible around admissions. This level of flexibility has been well demonstrated during the current admissions cycle as a result of the changes to the grading system for 2020 Higher exams. This has seen an increase in admissions of Scottish domiciled students to our universities, with a resultant increase in funding, which is welcome.

I have been clear, as was the Advisory Group on Economic Recovery (AGER), that the economic response to Covid-19 should be education-led and the AGER report goes into some detail as to specific actions which could be taken. Universities are, however, just one of a number of areas competing for scarce public resources and clearly, government will have a number of priority areas for investment around the post-Covid economic recovery.

As anchor institutions, universities are rooted locally and play a major social, cultural and economic role in the overall wellbeing of their local and regional communities – driving economic growth, creating jobs and attracting talented people from across the world to live, study and work in our communities. In Glasgow, I have spoken of the University and the City enjoying a symbiotic relationship – for one to succeed and fulfil its potential, so must the other. This is what we mean by universities acting as anchor institutions.

This role will only become more important as we seek to recover economically and socially from the impact of the pandemic. One key area where universities can support and grow our local communities is through widening participation and ensuring fair access to education. The pandemic has shone a spotlight on inequalities and, as noted in the AGER report, evidence

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suggests learning loss is having a disproportionate impact of on disadvantaged children and young people. We must take specific care to protect those between the ages of 16-25 who are at risk of unemployment before even embarking upon their careers, and we should especially look to mitigate the risks faced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been hit hard by the crisis. A focus on removing inequalities and barriers to accessing education is vital. Our sector continues to have a role to play in widening participation and government support for this is essential. At my own institution, we have continued with our successful University of Glasgow Widening Participation Summer School. This has run wholly online with a total of 881 pupils participating. However, despite the strong commitment across the sector to a range of diversity and widening participation programmes, we must recognise that there is more to be done in this space – in some cases, much more.

As anchor institutions, we also have a central role to play in developing place-based growth strategies. This, alongside a focus on our civic responsibility, creates potential for large institutions to deepen their community engagement and local impact. There are lessons to be learnt from successful regional collaboration networks being pursued in Europe and elsewhere and I discussed this collaborative approach previously in the Muscatelli Report. If we are to ensure the continued success of the sector and empower our further and higher education sector to support Scotland's economic recovery, then greater and accelerated collaboration both within and between the component parts of the education system is crucial.

As for the policy responses listed in the Scottish Government's response to the AGER report, I welcome the commitment to skills development and the introduction of a Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan. Investing in skills and education will allow for the re-skilling, training and upskilling of workers to suit the needs of the economy. In particular, by equipping our young people with a wide array of knowledge and skills, we are more likely to build a resilient and flexible workforce capable of adapting to a changing economy. However, it is also important to focus on lifelong learning alongside the need to train our young people. With the planned wind-down of the current income support schemes, there will be a greater need for upskilling and re-skilling provision to get people back into the labour market, including those who have been out of education for many years.

I also welcome the design of the talent attraction service for Scotland and the Talent Attraction and Retention Plan outlined briefly in the Scottish Government's response. Brexit may have a significant impact on our ability to attract scarce talent which key sectors such as nanotechnology, manufacturing and life sciences depend on. Brexit risks creating a 'bottleneck' in these skills and the Scottish Government should continue to consider how supply can be sustained and engage with a range of stakeholders and the UK Government on this matter.

Regarding levels of investment for schemes such as the Scottish Jobs Guarantee, the Committee will already be aware of the fiscal limitations of the current devolution settlement

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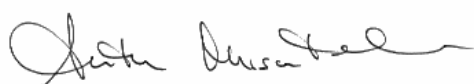
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and the impact this has in terms of facilitating large-scale investment. The Muscatelli Report provides further analysis on this but in broad terms, many fiscal powers are not within the remit of the Scottish Government. Both the UK and Scottish Government have provided unprecedented financial support during the pandemic to industry, workers and communities but it is clear that further fiscal support will be needed as we emerge from this economic shock, which does not necessitate and should not be the catalyst for a return to austerity policies.

As for other policies to be pursued, investing in digital infrastructure, as also discussed in the AGER report, will enhance productivity and reduce the digital skills gap. The move to flexible and remote working is dependent on the provision of digital services which have come under increased pressure recently as the number of users has increased. Investment in digital infrastructure should include broadband, fibre connections, 5G and mobile networks, to build resilience and enable growth, productivity and inclusion. The Scottish Government should incentivise researchers to continue to find clean and digital solutions. Universities have a role to play in shaping the future of technology, not only through R&D but through addressing the need for digital skills development. The University of Glasgow recently welcomed the findings of the Logan Review commissioned by the Scottish Government and published in August 2020. The review sets out a compelling vision of how Scotland has the potential to create a world-class tech ecosystem and highlights that we have a limited window of opportunity. The Review sets out serious challenges to all actors in the space – including universities, highlighting the need for graduates to be equipped with the entrepreneurial skills needed to support a pipeline of successful start-ups in the sector in Scotland. It also highlights real opportunities in how universities can work more closely with schools and colleges to create an end to end education which equips students at every level with the skills they need to succeed in the digital world.

I hope that I have fully addressed the Committee's questions and I thank you for the opportunity to help with your inquiry.

Yours sincerely,



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