



## **Unite Scotland response to the Scottish Funding Council Call for Evidence: A Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in Further and Higher Education**

### Introduction

Scotland's HE system is the envy of many countries around the world. Its reputation for excellence is well founded and its history and legacy are second to none.

We excel in research and development as well as teaching and three universities in Scotland appear in the top 25 universities in the UK. Student experiences have, time and again, put Scotland's universities as some of the best in the UK. All of this does not happen by chance. It is a combination of both the quality of teaching, excellent learning experiences and the commitment and dedication of the support services. If our universities were corporations, they would be blue chip.

It is therefore very disappointing that our universities and to a lesser extent our colleges, are facing a severe funding crisis. This has not happened solely as a result of Covid-19, Universities have over decades, placed an over reliance on international students as an income source as their funding from Government has diminished. The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent global lockdown has exacerbated this as a funding model and left some of Scotland's Universities on the brink of bankruptcy.

This is not a funding model solely identified in Scotland. Many of the UK's universities also rely heavily on the tuition fees from international students, as well as research funding from countries around the world to subsidise their running costs. As education is devolved, the crisis in Scotland is a result of among other things, insufficient funding from the Scottish Government over many years, which has pushed Scotland's universities and colleges to look at alternative revenue streams resulting in what we now know was a particularly high-risk model and highly susceptible to pandemics.

### Funding Implications

The projected black-hole in University finances highlights just how unsustainable a model that underfunds the core activities of institutions is. As a starting point, any review must commit to fully fund activities at full economic costing.

As mentioned, one of the underlying issues with tertiary education is that it is underfunded by Government. In Universities, the money per student from the SFC is generally less than

the cost of teaching a student (once all associated costs are calculated). The same is true with research. This results in Universities requiring to find extra income just to break even.

Currently, this money is found mainly from international student fees, hiring out teaching spaces for conferences, use of student accommodations as hotels outside Semester, and other commercial activities (such as student accommodation, shops, catering, etc) and in running overseas campuses.

Unite does not believe the investment in overseas campus provide the return expected. Indeed, they are in fact a drain on already stretched resources. Heriot Watt University is a prime example of this. They were amongst the first Universities to resort to announcing redundancies in response to the COVID crisis which we would argue is directly related to the extensive investment overseas, with the added risk of a heavy reliance on funding from overseas students.

According to Universities UK international students are worth around £7.3 billion a year to the UK economy which has partly funded the underfunding black hole created by successive Governments.

Unite members contributes to many aspects of the organisation and running of the HE and FE institutions including estates staff, technicians, professional services, facilities management, cleaners and catering. Their contribution is vital in ensuring a safe and healthy environment as well as a supportive and engaged learning experience. This is always identified as a significant factor when it we examine recruitment and invite students to explain why they selected Scotland as a choice of study. However it is these roles that are often identified by University management as easy pickings when cost cutting is considered.

Unite is concerned that these functions performed by its members, will be targeted in the rush to cut costs. A decision Unite would see as short-sighted and potentially confrontational, as we will not stand back and let this take place without a significant challenge.

Unite members who provide these essential services are highly committed professionals who take a personal pride in the quality and value of their work and would never wish to see it undervalued with a potential cost to the users and the sector.

Unite will also resist any attempt at merging institutions if this were to be put forward solely in the drive to save costs. This will impact hugely on our members who are likely to experience either job losses or detrimental contractual changes and in the quality and provision of the service.

Unite has further concerns that services delivered by the public sector are inevitably seen as wasteful and costly, while those delivered by the private sector, through outsourcing, are almost always seen as efficient and profitable. This isn't the case.

Any profits made through outsourcing to private companies will come at a cost and that usually involves detrimental impacts to workers pay, terms and conditions. However this will inevitably have a knock-on impact on the quality of services and functions of the institutions. We need to resist outsourcing, we have already seen lowest paid outsourced college and university staff furloughed at less than 100% pay and in some cases lost their

jobs. We also need to resist creation of sub-cos and non-directly employed staff, i.e. profit before people as is the plan for Glasgow University.

#### Inclusion

The funding model in the tertiary sector has been too reliant on overseas student funding and commercial income. Unite believes the time is right to make a case to properly fund the sector and to get back to principles of what education is supposed to be about, inclusion for all, widening access to those from underprivileged backgrounds as well as older learners/those returning to education, priority on delivering for learners at local level which in turn delivers wider economic benefits to local communities.

Projections are for unemployment in the UK to reach levels not seen since the 1930's which could in turn provide opportunities for retraining, re-skilling, or upskilling or taking on a new career altogether via college and university courses. However the HE and FE sector must be prepared for this upturn and have the resources and capacity to play a full part.

#### Meaningful engagement

Unite members have faced an unprecedented amount of pressure as a result of the underfunding of the tertiary sector and have expressed their frustrations over increased workloads; taking holidays only to return to a huge backlog of work which means that the relaxing effect of the holiday quickly evaporates; the constant erosion of support staff, which are the backbone of any institution (with academics providing the branches of learning and the complete lack of opportunity for succession planning. Staff appear to leave and replacements, if they are appointed, are not available to work for months. This creates an environment of low morale and detachment. The mental health of our members is being negatively impacted.

There needs to be a review of organisational change policies and sector wide redundancy policies that are fit for purpose. There is currently too much autonomy at institutional level which lacks transparency and leads to inconsistent treatment of our members.

Of vital importance is a commitment from college and university management and HR to early meaningful consultation on all issues that impact the workforce. Unite is acutely aware that inevitably there will be changes and impacts on our members as a result of the funding crisis in the sector. Compulsory redundancy should be an absolute last resort after all other options have been explored. Full transparency including financial positions that determine decision making should be shared with trade unions in advance of decisions being made to ensure trade unions have an opportunity to influence critical thinking, work together with management to mitigate impacts and achieve alternative outcomes that provide job security as a first priority. This should equally apply to voluntary severance programmes that are all too often seen as an easy option to cut costs without proper consultation. This should equally apply to outsourced, fixed term and non-permanent staff who work in university and college buildings. Ensuring coherent sustainability within the sector requires a new and progressive approach to trade union engagement, building trusted relationships and viewing the trade unions role as critical and the voice of the workforce who are the number one asset of every college and university.

Central to that would be the continuation and extension of facility time for Unite reps. It is imperative that the workforce interests are central to the plans for reform or change related

to the funding challenges many colleges and universities are facing. As such, time and resources must be made available to facilitate this. This would show clear adherence and commitment to the Scottish Government's Fair Work principles and recognising that employee voice is essential to work collaboratively with trade unions in delivering the best possible outcomes for all.

### Fair Work

The Scottish Government has laid down very clear guidelines for Scotland to become a country of fair work. This includes giving employees a voice which also includes trade union recognition, collective bargaining, payment of the Living Wage and fair treatment.

Covid-19 has highlighted the role played by key workers during the pandemic, with many of the universities and college support staff working throughout the crisis. Their work was vital to the function of our universities and colleges. Our members, many of whom worked through the crisis are the lowest paid. They must not pay the price with their jobs, there is already threats of redundancies. We need a commitment to Fair Work and closer working with TUs by both colleges and universities.

These roles will be instrumental moving forward in a safe, efficient and successful learning space and as such must be involved in supporting the key decisions affecting the HE and FE sector to support and deliver change.

Covid 19 has also shown that more flexible working arrangements can work. Members should be allowed to continue to work flexibly, cost savings reinvested in wider college/university activity, e.g. improving IT equipment for students to tackle digital poverty.

Unite members would wish to see for example the continuation of staff cross campus virtual meetings via MS Teams/Zoom. This would also provide an added benefit through enabling more productive use of staff time, limit time spent travelling which for some can add many hours to the working day. This would have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing of our members.

### Governance

As part of any review there must be a robust and transparent review of Principal and Senior Management pay undertaken. Trade union representation on College Boards and University Court should oversee this along with an input into the Remuneration Committees. There must be more transparency and scrutiny on Principals who appear to spend public money without sufficient oversight or scrutiny.

On top of this Unite would argue that there is too much bureaucracy/top heavy management by individuals who it would appear are not managed themselves however seem to see the managing the performance of others, including our members, as a necessity.

### Education led recovery

What does an average student look like? Currently we build the sector around mostly school leavers, studying full time. Covid has demonstrated that many of these courses can be taught in radically different ways, why is there not more part-time, blended/hybrid and

flexible provision for older learners, and those in employment? Current funding structures require individuals wanting to study part time to pay full fees as soon as they earn £25,000. Unite does not believe that this encourages lifelong learning.

Covid has also demonstrated the market for education, training, and reskilling beyond simply school leavers. It needs to be easier for people to access the learning that they need, when they need it and the methods by which it is delivered.

A well-educated populace is desirable, and not necessarily only on courses that are “good” for the economy. It should be easier for more workers to be able to learn for the love of learning. This shouldn’t be something only open to those who can afford it but instead should be something promoted and encouraged as part of our wider culture. Unite already works with a number of colleges to provide trade union education courses and we would be keen to develop our relationship with the sector to promote lifelong learning and opportunities for personal and professional development.

Open studies provision from most providers is confusing, expensive, and often on topics that aren’t attractive to many people. Opening these courses up more widely to create microcredentials, or degree programmes on a cross-institutional basis where HEI’s fully recognise each other’s credits, or do combined courses would help share the load and the benefits of education across institutions. This allows people to build their own education in a pathway, time, and cost which suits them.

More coherent articulation from college to University is also required. Those studying HE courses at college are often disadvantaged, after studying 2 years at College, they only come in to 2<sup>nd</sup> year at University (instead of 3<sup>rd</sup>). How can we align the college and university HE teaching more coherently, especially as colleges are a major route of working class and returning students into higher education. This also requires consideration of the format of teaching, currently the mode of learning between HE at college and in Universities is dramatic, and another indicator of the cultural elitism of universities.

#### Collaboration

Colleges and Universities should work more closely with industry and agencies in identifying the training and education needs of workers and the wider economy, developing bespoke courses at the modular and programme level. This ensures that more provision is aligned with our economic demands, and that engagement with education throughout your career is seen as the norm.

This must include continuous personal and professional development of those employed within our colleges and universities to improve the learning opportunities on offer, develop them and ensure their skills and knowledge are up to date. Currently there is a lack of opportunity for support staff to develop in role and to advance their careers.

Unite recognises that there does need to be more progression/articulation routes for learners from college to university and closer relationships with employers including employment backed guarantee schemes.

Lockdown has proven education can continue and be a positive experience. Money can be saved and invested in other areas which would greatly benefit the student journey. There is a potential threat that college and university IT infrastructure is no fit for purpose to cope with new ways of learning and teaching.

There should be increased and improved opportunities to look at investment within the local community on courses relevant to local needs or demands. Many potential learners are perhaps put off applying for courses outwith their areas due to financial barriers. Local opportunities could help to alleviate this.

However this must be carried out within the sphere of the public sector. Unite would oppose any attempt to shift the public nature of the Scottish Education system towards one with a focus solely on commercial income. This would severely impact on our members. Where we have previously witnessed other public services outsourced to private companies within local authorities, this has come with an attack on workers' jobs, pay, terms and conditions. Therefore while noting the content of the Cumberford Little Report, we do not support much of the report and we need to be careful not to blur the lines.

The funding crisis we are witnessing is not of Covid-19 making. It has been building for many years and it is partly down to the lack of action by those at the top. While enjoying six figure salaries many Principals have remained relatively quiet as the Government removed funding from this key sector of the Scottish economy. It is now time for those at the top to join with the trade unions to demand increased resources and to work with us to ensure Scotland's HE and FE sector thrives.

If this review has the potential to radically reimagine our tertiary education sector, we have to ask what do we really want it to look like? As implied by the review's purpose, it is currently incoherent. University practice is practically unchanged from the days when students were the children of the wealthy, from culture down to teaching methods. A more democratised sector would improve not only the stability of the sector, but general education and pedagogical practice.

### Sustainability

Unite is calling for innovation and critical thinking in delivering Scotland's Further and Higher Education sector in the future. From new and innovative ways of teaching, learning and working, to working with partners that bring a different perspective on the experience could bring opportunities which would contribute to more sustainable outcomes.

Climate change is held by many as a more significant threat than the current pandemic and it would be in keeping with a nation which prides itself on the natural beauty of the landscape and has already made a commitment to renewable energy to take a lead on research and positive action in this area. Hopefully we can then export our experience and skills to other nations across the globe and emerge as a leader in sustainability. (see Appendix 1)

### Covid and Brexit

The tragedy of the pandemic can never be underestimated and there will be a commitment from government and nations across the globe to ensuring that we never again experience such a dreadful world-wide tragedy.

The short-term impact upon our sector needs to be considered of course and a suitable strategy developed to sustain us, promote recovery and look toward the future both short and long term.

I think it is fair to say that we expect student recruitment to dip this year. Many potential students will consider a gap year and reconsider as the pandemic declines or at least responds to control measures. This however will not be a long-term response, and students who defer will almost certainly want to gain a place the year following, very possibly leading to disappointment if we cannot offer places.

The withdrawal from Europe may have a significant impact upon movement of those from the European union but we will continue to support European workers within our economy and so a combination of fast track for those who wish to enter the country to study and the development of new courses, again perhaps part time, evenings, distance learning or a combination of all three, which are designed to support incoming workers as well as the student population may provide opportunity.

## Conclusion

A considered review of this sector with an underlying commitment to development based upon future needs and sustainability must take into account the overall contributions the sector makes both culturally and financially and proceed carefully so as not to jeopardise that contribution.

In addition to the financial benefits discussed earlier the social structure within Higher and Further Education encourages the development of community across a wider range of cultural backgrounds and introduces equality and diversity as an integral part of the institutional values.

Unite is the largest trade union in the UK and represent numerous staff across a wide spectrum within both HE and FE. Unite would welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with the Scottish Government and Funding Council to develop an achievable and sustainable outcome which will benefit students, staff, employers and local communities with a seamless transition to longer held goals.

(Appendix 1)

## **Climate Emergency – joint statement – STUC, Universities Scotland, NUS**

The climate emergency remains one the most significant challenges facing the world. Doing nothing is not an option. We must commit to building a more sustainable world as we move on from the Covid-19 lockdown.

As three organisations representing workers, institutions and students in the higher education sector in Scotland, we recognise our sector is uniquely placed to influence and effect change, and to make a meaningful difference to the world and its inhabitants.

Together we sign up to the following points:

1. Declaring a climate emergency.
2. Pledge net zero emissions in higher education by 2030.
3. Transition from fossil fuels in line with Just Transition principles of decent, fair and high value work which does not negatively affect the current workforce.
4. Agree to establishing institution-wide steering groups involving management, unions, students to review and update climate change strategy, and devise and implement actions for change.
5. Embed sustainable development goals into education (including the curricula), research, leadership, operations, administration, engagement and knowledge exchange.
6. Lobbying government on the issue.
7. Collaborate with partners in the locality and globally to make progress on climate change.
8. Upholding academic freedom for all during the climate change transition.
9. Institutions to report annually on progress on sustainability and climate change strategy.
10. Calling on the Scottish Government to help fund the transition.