

**Further and Higher Education Student Support Review
Working Group**

**Friday 28th April 2017 10:30 to 12:00
Ayrshire College**

MINUTES

In attendance:

Jayne-Anne Gadhia (Chair)
Angela Toal (Child Poverty Action Group)
Dr John Kemp (Scottish Funding Council)
Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland)
Phillip Whyte (NUS Scotland)
Annag MacLean (Castlebay Community School)
Russell Gunson (IPPR Scotland)
Yvonne MacDermid (Money Advice Scotland)
John Gallacher (UNISON)
Geraldine Campbell (Scottish Government)
Stephen White (Scottish Government)
Emily Cox (Virgin Money)
Graeme Hudson (Virgin Money)

Anne Ward (Student Awards Agency Scotland, (SAAS), in place of Paul Lowe)
Gillian Plunkett (City of Glasgow College, on behalf of Colleges Scotland)
Lynn Graham (Scottish Government - Learner Journey section)

Secretariat:

Jennifer Finn (Scottish Government)
Stephen Pearson (Virgin Money)
Lisa Keevash (Virgin Money)

Apologies:

Shona Struthers (Colleges Scotland)
Louise Macdonald (Young Scot)
Vonnie Sandlan (NUS Scotland)
Paul Lowe (Student Awards Agency Scotland)
Erin McAuley (Scottish Youth Parliament and Student)
Liz Shevlin (Scottish Government)

1. Welcome

- 1.1 Jayne-Anne Gadhia (JAG) thanked Working Group members for attending and to Ayrshire College for hosting the meeting.
- 1.2 JAG noted a number of apologies from; Vonnie, Paul, Erin, Louise and Shona.
- 1.3 JAG referenced useful discussions held with Shirley-Anne Somerville, Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science when they last met on 31st March. Geraldine confirmed that the Minister is appreciative of the work to date made by the Review Group. Graeme said that the intention is to go ahead with an interim event at the University of Edinburgh on 25th May from 3-4pm. Geraldine confirmed that the Minister is supportive of this event going ahead despite the unexpected announcement of a General Election. JAG said that the intention would be for the event to launch a formal consultation which will influence the final report which is due by Autumn 2017.

- 1.4 JAG outlined four objectives to the meeting which were; presentation of sub-group reports; discussion on draft preliminary recommendation; next steps to get us to event on 25th May and; presentation from the Scottish Government on the Commission on Widening Access.

2. Sub-group Final Reports and Discussion

- 2.1 JAG invited John K to present the principles/recommendations from the **Effective Administration and Delivery sub-group**.

John K explained that this sub-group met over a number of meetings. He went onto say that the group had produced high-level recommendations based on the structure of the student support system. He added that the group recognised the need for additional work, both fundamentally and in the detail.

John K then presented the 5 recommendations from the Effective Admin. and Delivery sub-group. These included; a single, common system for processing student funding applications, management of a single system by SAAS; extension of SAAS functions for managing fraudulent applications; enhancements to the systems around data sharing and; further work to be undertaken on the costing, timing and transitional arrangements for any changes.

John G stated that he had fundamental issues with the content of this sub-group paper. He further added that UNISON would be unable to provide a positive response to any consultation on these recommendations. John G said that he accepted variation in practice in the delivery of student support across Further Education (FE) but felt that proper evaluation must be undertaken. He said that he could support a single system of support but not the complete transfer of it to the administrative function to SAAS. He further said that he could not support the language used in the paper on staffing, that transferring to a single system would increase costs and that he felt compulsory redundancies would be an inevitable consequence despite the paper's assurance on no compulsory redundancies. He went onto say that colleges cannot rationalise and re-train staff on this basis having already gone through the regionalisation process. He said that he was surprised that the Minister would be in support of such changes and intended to make his concerns clear at a planned meeting taking place next week on broader college sector industrial relations.

JAG stated that she is particularly concerned about jobs and thinks that if any move was made to a single system then a no compulsory redundancy deal should be made. She further said that she would not support any move to a system which would prevent students from getting the support they need and the financial support which is available to them.

Stephen asked to make clear to the group that the Minister is content with the conduct of the Review but has not commented on content given the independent nature of this Review. He asked that the Minister's contentment on conduct is not construed as any endorsement on any specific issues or recommendations.

John K said that the paper does make clear that consulting UNISON is essential and that a no compulsory deal should be made. He further said that what colleges currently delivery to students in terms of local support would still be required.

Gillian referenced the student group from earlier that day, some of whom said the current FE system was effectively delivering for their needs. She further added that she had understood the proposals in the paper as SAAS providing a processing service on behalf of colleges rather than managing a process. She didn't think the proposals in the paper should result in any major change to the way that students in FE interact with their support office at the front end, changes would be at the back end. She also said that the college sector must understand their student profile so would be concerned about any move to central source of data collection.

Philip said that a national system of support administered centrally has always been a red line for NUS as they believe local support is essential. He said however that it is important to consider which part of the system is centralised. If it's the 'front-end', NUS would not support but if it was the 'back-end' they would. He suggested that colleges could input onto the SAAS system rather than using separate systems across the sector as he knows that students depend upon that local face-to-face support.

Russell said that a common application process would ensure a more joined-up approach and could remove the burden on students. He suggested that this could free up staff time to deliver the front-facing support. He further added that he would share the same concerns about staff if local support was being reduced.

JAG stated that any negative impact on staff would be a red line for her too and wouldn't endorse anything that would result in compulsory redundancies.

John G said that re-presentation of John K's paper is required as he does not read into the paper in the same way as other Working group members. He further added that data collection centrally may be an effective change.

JAG said that in terms of the interim findings, more work is required on understanding what is meant by an efficient common system (i.e. this could be administered slightly differently) and what that may look like. Russell suggested that a common FE system should be considered. JAG said that she felt this would be a backwards step and that common ground between FE And Higher Education (HE) could help enhance the student's experience.

John K asked the group to look at the section of his paper which makes clear that college staff should remain providing local support and that it was not the intention for SAAS to take over the delivery of that role. JAG referenced Gillian's earlier point that that SAAS provide a processing service but colleges deliver customer service.

John G said that FE support is led by a heritage of people in the system and suggested a common system across FE could provide an interim step before a common system that operates across both FE and HE is implemented in the longer term. He said that there was no historical evidence of linkage across FE and HE systems. He further added that any system must suit the needs of both FE and HE students.

Anne said it was interesting to hear Working group members' views on the language contained in the paper. She said that SAAS currently work in partnership with both colleges and universities and emphasised the shared journey for students. She agreed that some

of the language contained in the paper should be re-worked to avoid misinterpretation.

Stephen added that Ministers are not likely to want to make diagnostic comments about systems operation but rather, are interested to hear students' views so it is important to reflect on what the evidence is saying. He also talked about the need for the structure of any student support system to be seen as a socio-economic investment.

John K said that he agreed with a lot of John G's comments and particularly on the delivery to a common standard. John G said that the model described had not been articulated in the paper. JAG suggested that the group come back to these points at Agenda item 3.

2.2 JAG invited Yvonne to present the principles/recommendations from the **Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and Financial Literacy sub-group**.

Yvonne said that this group met 4 times with the requirement for sharp and focussed discussions. She also asked to register her thanks for Scottish Government support on evidence gathering as this group were heavily informed by this research.

She went onto say that the key finding of this group was a lack of advice which was held centrally or nationally and that was consistent. She also referenced evidence of student non-uptake of loans. Yvonne said that the key themes for this group were the need for; consistency, more collaboration, communication and early intervention. She said that sharing good practice, both internally and externally, is essential.

Yvonne said that the group had produced 5 key recommendations which were; a single, common, inclusive and accessible digital platform on all elements for student support and for all students; student facing support to be retained; improvement of financial literacy; effective connections to money advice services external to colleges and universities and; adoption of a 'whole systems' approach to policy development.

Yvonne further added that there is a need for consistent and accessible training, including for those external to the FE and HE sectors. On the digital platform, Yvonne said that this sub-group discussed the potential for Young Scot to deliver this but were concerned that some learners may be put off given the term 'Young'. She said that the group agreed that SAAS should be considered as a potential host. Yvonne also said that the group recognised that not all students or potential students are digitally able and that paper versions must remain available. She also said that the group also agreed on important connections to be made to the 15-25 Learner Journey Review.

JAG said that if this was all the Review group delivered then this would be a success and agreed that communication is key.

Gillian said that a digital platform would be welcomed and agreed on the need to improve information on student loans and debt. She suggested that this should start in schools and should be linked to subject choice and progression. Yvonne said that the sub-group did consider these points but agreed it wasn't within scope of their

particular group. She referenced that considerable work is already undertaken with schools via MAS. Gillian agreed that barriers are already being removed as school pupils access college courses, particularly via the Developing the Young Workforce Programme, but that this work must take account of this in order to be future-proof. Gillian suggested that a simple, understandable product should be aspired to which would help with clarity of communication.

John G said that further work may be required on understanding who the partners of any digital platform would be and must consider those with extra needs. JAG suggested that these issues should be considered in more detail as part of the formal consultation and then in more detail again over the summer months following that.

2.3 JAG invited Russell to present the principles/recommendations from the **Benefits and Support sub-group**.

Russell said that this group met 4 times with a focus on structures and outcomes for students, looking at the interaction between the discretionary FE and entitlement HE student support systems with welfare benefits. He went on to say that even if a student does not apply for HE student support they do not qualify for welfare benefits but some students at FE level can remain on benefits whilst studying. He posed the question to the group of whether that was right. Russell said that this sub-group's paper made a principle for recommendation for interim findings.

Russell went on to say that the group found that the current interactions between student support and welfare benefits were not optimal. He said that those groups with benefit entitlement had narrowed and shifted over time and that the distinction at FE/HE level no longer makes sense. He suggested that the distinction would be better made based on different groups of students. Russell also said that research revealed that transitions are poor, both when leaving benefits for student support and vice versa. He suggested that transition challenges could be avoided if some students can remain on benefits whilst studying.

Russell said that the key principles from this sub-group were; no student should face a 'benefits trap' in deciding to study at FE or HE level; students that move from welfare benefits to student support funding should not receive less financial support and; students able to receive benefits whilst studying should be supported to do so. He went on to say that the group suggest a 'twin-track' system whereby there is one system of support for those students ineligible for welfare benefits and another system for those who are. The model would ensure that both students would receive the same level of financial support regardless of the main source. Russell went on to say that there are models where this is already working in practice, e.g. Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is an entitlement system which does not impact upon benefit entitlement and the 'Special Support Grant' in RuK.

Russell said that this sub-group had considered some 'early wins' and suggested; start and end date for student support/welfare benefits to close any gaps; standardisation of payment dates which better match the needs of students; summer hardship funds and consideration of a Carer's Allowance and attendance rules.

Russell suggested that the next stage for this area of work is for further

consideration as part of the formal consultation.

John G asked how a twin-track system could work in terms of agreement from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Russell suggested that the group should explore issues that are within their gift and to work round DWP policy changes. Russell acknowledged that the benefits system is currently in transition with the introduction of Universal Credit.

John K said that he understood the logic of a twin track system but asked about benefit rules and whether the group are sure that a twin system could be implemented. Russell said that he thinks it can but it must be explored. Philip suggested that legislation replicate the current approach taken with EMA/benefit interaction. John K asked if the UK Government would be accepting of that.

JAG said that the group must consider what's right for Scottish students.

Stephen said that the paper was smart and ideas rich but that this area is not without complexity and challenge. He said that the principle that no one should be out of pocket to study was good but asked how far this could be extended. He suggested that this type of system would require students to declare their personal situation which should be supported by effective IAG. He acknowledged that this area of work was fresh, creative thinking.

JAG suggested that given the breadth of the paper, it would be helpful if Russell could focus on key priorities as a next step. Russell agreed that further work is required but suggested that exploration of the legislation should be considered via commissioning research.

2.4 JAG went onto update the group on the work of the **Finance sub-group**.

JAG explained the review's remit in relation to additional budget for student support funding and stated the need to ensure welfare benefit entitlement can remain. She went on to say that whilst there may be no additional bursary funding, consideration could be given to the extension of student loans, with bursaries directed towards those students most in need. She asked the Working Group if they were comfortable with increasing accessibility to loans.

Yvonne said that she would want to make sure that any loans system is transparent. John K said that around 40,000 full-time FE students could benefit from access to student loans.

Philip said that the constraints on public finances may have constrained aspirations for this Review. He referenced the commitment for a Student Support Review in both the Manifesto and Programme for Government. He asked the group if there was appetite to push back on budget constraints.

JAG said that providing increased loans would have cost implications. She also said that the student focus groups had not suggested that students did not have enough money. Philip referenced the results of the YouGov student survey which suggested that some students were relying on commercial credit and that some students are working full-time to fund their studies and the group must ask the question about what it believes is an acceptable way to top up support.

Stephen said that budget constraints were not just a fiscal reality but part of the remit of this Review. He went onto ask the group that if there is equality across FE and HE, are loans acceptable. Russell said that if the aspiration was to match FE to the amount a student can receive on welfare benefits, then loans would have to be involved. Russell said that ideally a student would receive a bursary but does not want students being left short so if asked to make the difficult choice he would personally opt for debt over hardship. JAG agreed with this principle.

Alastair said that this seemed like a sensible approach to means-test bursaries for students from the lowest incomes.

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| 3. Refining Interim Recommendations | 3.1 | <p><i>***This item was agreed to be re-visited at the Board Call on 10th May***</i></p> |
| 4. Interim Recommendations Launch and Consultation Paper | 4.1 | <p>Geraldine explained that a number of discussions could be advanced before the next main review board by call on 10th May ahead of an interim findings event on 25th May.</p> |
| 5. SG – Commission on Widening Access | 5.1 | <p>Lynn explained to the group her role in supporting the Scottish Government's (SG) Commission on Widening Access. She went onto explain the recommendations/findings with most connections to the Review of Student Support.</p> <p>JAG asked Lynn if research on student finance and welfare benefits interaction would be useful. Lynn agreed this would be beneficial. JAG went onto ask Lynn about students' understanding of loans. Lynn suggested that this was not well understood by students and their work had come across anecdotal evidence of cases where parents and guardians were actively discouraging take up of student loans.</p> <p>Gillian suggested that a loan 'write-off' or maximum repayment must be considered as some students could be studying a longer route for up to 8 years. Yvonne added that advice must be consistent for improving financial literacy. JAG agreed that financial advice is essential.</p> |
| 6. Closing and AOB | 6.1 | <p>JAG suggested that there are four key issues/actions to be considered ahead of the next meeting of this group –</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. John G and John K to discuss the language contained within the Effective Administration and Delivery sub-group report. 2. Given the remit of the Review, any final report should respect the financial constraints that have been made clear and make recommendations mindful of budget. 3. More work should be undertaken on the Benefits and Support sub-group report, particularly around practical recommendations that we are confident can be delivered. 4. Further consideration to be given to the extent of and communication on student loans. <p>Action: Graeme to pull together above 4 points and organise a draft agenda for the next meeting around these points.</p> |

6.2 JAG thanked the group for attending the meeting and for their contributions. The next meeting of the group will take place by conference call on Wednesday 10th May at 09:00.