

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

**Wednesday 10th May 2017 09:00 – 10:00
By Conference Call**

MINUTES

In attendance:

Jayne-Anne Gadhia (Chair)
Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland)
Louise Macdonald (Young Scot)
Yvonne MacDermid (Money Advice Scotland)
Shona Struthers (Colleges Scotland)
John Gallacher (UNISON)
Phillip Whyte (NUS Scotland)
Vonnie Sandlan (NUS Scotland)
Angela Toal (Child Poverty Action Group)
Anne Ward (Student Awards Agency Scotland, in place of Paul Lowe)
Stephen White (Scottish Government)
Emily Cox (Virgin Money)
Graeme Hudson (Virgin Money)

Secretariat:

Jennifer Finn (Scottish Government)
Liz Shevlin (Scottish Government)

Apologies:

Dr John Kemp (Scottish Funding Council)
Paul Lowe (Student Awards Agency Scotland)
Russell Gunson (IPPR Scotland)
Erin McAuley (Scottish Youth Parliament and Student)
Annag MacLean (Castlebay Community School)

1. **Welcome**
 - 1.1 Jayne-Anne Gadhia (JAG) thanked Working Group members for participating in the call. She recorded apologies from Russell, John K and Paul.

JAG also thanked Working Group members for a helpful debate at the last meeting of the group at the Kilmarnock campus of Ayrshire College on Friday 28th April.
2. **Discussion of key areas**
 - 2.1 JAG set out the four key areas that members agreed to discuss at the last meeting on 28/04 which will progress the work of the group to the interim event and launch of the consultation on 25th May. JAG suggested the group consider each point in turn:
 - 2.2 **Administration of support in FE and HE**
JAG explained that John G and John K have considered the wording contained within the recommendation on administration and asked John G to provide further detail on that. John G said that he also had a useful discussion with Graeme but said further detail is required on the role of SAAS if it is to be considered in Further Education (FE). He stated that a common administration of support is dependent upon the level of face-to-face support in FE. He further stated his view that the Minister is supportive of face-to-face support remaining in FE and that principles should be forceful on that point. He said that, in terms of interim principles, it is difficult to capture a

system which may be run by FE but uses SAAS systems. He further said that if there's a common administrative system delivering bursaries and loans across FE and HE then the assumption would be that SAAS is the delivery agent.

JAG referred the group to paper 3.1 which outlines the proposal for an alignment of administrative systems across FE and HE, enhanced by local, face-to-face support. JAG asked the group if all were in agreement with that approach which she further suggested provides structure for the second phase of the Review following the interim event on 25/05.

John G suggested that the wording continued to suggest a single administrative system and would be more comfortable with a change of language to, 'shared administrative systems' rather than it suggesting a single structure.

Stephen suggested that the aspiration is to produce a system which provides a better service for students and suggested, 'shared, consistent and coherent'. He further suggested that an outcome approach be adopted rather than a focus in the specific wording. He said that space would be available to drill down into the specifics. JAG said she was happy with Stephen's suggestions. John G further agreed on 'shared, consistent and coherent'. Yvonne said that she would also support that as it provides flexibility for the next phase of the Review.

Shona joined the call

JAG suggested that if all in agreement then she would propose that the narrative contained within paper 3.1 be used to explain the Group's progress and four key principles rather than the publication of the existing and more detailed seven principles at this time.

Louise asked if the group have agreed on support for students aged under 18. Graeme confirmed that this issue remains under debate and confirmed it has previously been proposed that this be further considered during phase 2 of the Review. Louise agreed that further consideration is required and suggested that this area of work be aligned to the Learner Journey Review as could be complimentary.

JAG said that during her meeting with Professor Scott, he suggested that the Group need to address support for part-time students and that the Group should also make clear that individual institution bursaries are not within the scope of this Review. John G suggested that it is also made clear that bursaries for nursing are excluded.

John G asked about the status of the Effective Administration and Delivery paper presented to the group at the last meeting on 28/04. JAG advised that the paper was one of a number that have contributed to the Group's debate thus far and have supported the current status of proposals. She said that the paper was advisory and the Group are not required to formally accept or reject each paper.

Vonnie expressed her concerns on the Group's role. She stated that it was her belief that the Group are working together to adopt a collaborative approach to produce recommendations. She asked JAG if she would be making final decisions or if they would as a Group. JAG said that she would not want to produce final recommendations which the Group were not supportive of. JAG

suggested that this point could be made clear in the introductory section for the interim event on 25/05.

Stephen agreed and confirmed that the Review set out to have a Working Group for a collective endeavour. He suggested that the intention would not be to commit to anything that has not been consensually agreed, where possible. He suggested that for the 25/05 event, a creative dialogue be adopted which could make clear that not everyone is in agreement on every point if that was the case and that further debate will take place.

JAG confirmed she supported Stephen's suggested approach. John G and Vonnie stated they were comfortable with that intent.

2.3 **Cost Constraints**

JAG said that it had been made clear to her from the outset that the Group was to be mindful of financial constraints. She suggested that the way forward would be to note this in the recommendations. Shona asked for clarification on this issue.

JAG explained that the challenge to date from NUS had been on a commitment to students receiving funding equivalent to the living wage. She said she had a lot of sympathy for that stance but understands that the Scottish Government has financial constraints. JAG further suggested that the Review Group could separately have options for the Scottish Government to consider which would incur costs.

Vonnie said she was frustrated with this approach as NUS had long campaigned for the Review to take place and that the Review is intrinsically linked to the Widening Access agenda. She further added that she had not had considerable time to consider the impact fully. She also said that she was frustrated that the issue about support for students under 18 had not been agreed on ahead of the interim event on 25/05. She said that the option to provide more debt to students did not sit with the bold aspirations that were set out for the Review. She went onto say that she appreciated the difficulties with financial constraints.

Philip referred the minutes from the first meeting of the group of 5th December which stated that the Group should be mindful of public finances but then also that the Group should not be constrained by budget.

Stephen said that a formal remit for the Group was provided which asked that the Group be mindful of the evident constraints on public finance. Stephen further said that it was the Group's judgement on whether they consider recommendations with costs attached but it is primarily for the Group to agree a way forward, mindful of the strong message in the remit.

Alastair said that he supported Vonnie's emphasis on the Widening Access agenda. He further suggested that the Group consider that access to increased levels of funding could be made available to students via loans with the bursary funds focussed on those who most need it.

Alastair left the call

JAG confirmed that the current intention is to provide bursaries for less well-off students. She further added that it has been made clear to her on more than one occasion that no additional bursary funding

is available. JAG suggested that Vonnie and Philip, on behalf of NUS, write a paper setting out why increased funding should be considered so that there is no silence on that specific point.

Louise said she was supportive of that suggestion but asked if this could be provided as part of the official consultation as would demonstrate that the Group recognise the context and wish to be open. Yvonne said she was in agreement with Louise. JAG said she was not in full support of that suggestion.

John G said that it would be unfortunate to separate the consultation paper, and indeed Working Group, from NUS. He further added that there may be political leverage of an increase in bursary funding if the only way forward is to increase loans. JAG advised that the total budget for bursaries across FE and HE was in excess of c.£170m but if that was to be extended to living wage levels then there may not be sufficient funds. John G said that an increased bursary for some could be an option. JAG said that further thought must be given to options.

Shona added that Colleges Scotland also support NUS' position. She said that she heard the Minister on financial constraints and respects that but doesn't mean the group can't put forward recommendations for consideration in the future. She also said that they could consider the potential for a re-allocation of resources.

Philip said that it's important the Group don't automatically discount anything and can collectively suggest options and opportunities, particularly around welfare reform for example. JAG said she had sympathy with Philip's approach. John G expressed his agreement.

JAG asked Vonnie and Philip to consider how best to take forward the issues they have raised. Vonnie said that they have produced a lot of briefings over the past number of years and could provide a paper as soon as the following week. JAG said she wouldn't want to consult on that paper but rather that it serve as a secondary paper.

Louise said that it is her view that some of the issues could be talked through via a change in language. She also expressed her concern that the Group's recommend changes 'tinker around edges' rather than suggest anything radical. She suggested it is important that the Group signal that they recognise what can be done now and what can be considered longer term. JAG suggested that the recommendations could be considered in that way.

Anne said there are further issues which could be explored, e.g. 3 year courses. JAG said that it is her intention not to go outside of the Review remit.

Stephen said that there is risk attached to producing two papers and suggested that an illustration of the debate be provided as part of the dialogue for the 25/05 event. He suggested that this point of the Review represents a good time for debate and the group to consider whether two papers is appropriate. JAG said that she does not want to produce recommendations that will not be accepted. Stephen further added that being open and transparent about dialogue to date would be preferable. JAG agreed and committed to further consider under challenging timescales.

Shona said that the Group could consider quick wins but make sure all points are covered without breaching the remit. Vonnie said that

she appreciated colleagues' support and expressed her desire for students to be supported with the right level of funding to succeed. She said that the correct student experience calls for more than the current funding settlement.

JAG suggested that the next steps would be for her to update the draft consultation document in light of this discussion. Her preference would be for challenge from working group members in order to support breadth and explore issues in more detail during phase 2.

2.4 **Interaction of benefits and student support**

JAG asked Philip, in Russell's absence, to provide an update. Philip referred to the principles provided as part of the Benefits and Support sub-group paper presented at the last meeting of the Group on 28/04. He said that further work is required which won't be fully captured ahead of the interim event on 25/05. He suggested that this issue be included in the consultation for further consideration. JAG and the Group agreed.

2.5 **Student loans: the extension into FE and overall re-brand**

JAG asked the Working Group if all were agreed to parity across FE and HE, bursaries for the lowest income backgrounds and the extension of student loans.

John G said that he has some personal reservations about loans for FE students but further information would be required on the specific detail and repayment. He referred to FE loans in England whereby if students' progress to HE level study, FE debt is written-off. He said that commencing employment earning £17k with student debt repayment would be painful.

Shona added that there is an issue with language. She said that when referring to FE students taking on loans, that would be a similar expectation of a school pupil taking on debt. She said there is more parity between HE at college and HE at university.

JAG suggested that the Group must consult on this matter.

Vonnie said that she is against increasing debt for students and referenced that for FE students with household incomes above £24k, there is no funding and are let down by the system. She said that would be equivalent to less than two adults working full-time and earning the minimum wage. She said that NUS have tolerated the FE system as it was non-repayable but it would be a red line to reduce FE bursary support and replace with loans with current terms.

JAG said that she understands Vonnie's position. She referenced a meeting with Professor Scott who suggested that financial modelling must be undertaken to better understand options. JAG advised the Group that this work is underway.

Vonnie further added that mature adult-returners to FE are another group that have not been considered. JAG agreed to add that to the list of issues still to be considered.

3. **Preliminary recommendations**

- 3.1 ****This item was agreed to be re-visited by email/telephone ahead of the interim event on 25th May****

- 4. Interim event and consultation paper** 4.1 ****This item was agreed to be re-visited by email/telephone ahead of the interim event on 25th May****
- 5. Closing and AOB** 5.1 The Chair thanked everyone for their contributions. She suggested that the Group consider speaking again ahead of the interim event on 25/05 either over email or by telephone. John G advised that he would not be available next week.
- JAG said that the interim event presents a good opportunity to consult ahead of phase 2 of the Review and identify challenges to take the Group to Autumn reporting. She further added that she is keen to get to a place of consensus.