

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

**Friday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2017 14:00 to 15:00  
Virgin Money, St Andrew Square, Edinburgh**

**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)  
Linda Somerville (NUS Scotland)  
Annag MacLean (Castlebay Community School)  
Russell Gunson (IPPR Scotland)  
John Gallacher (UNISON)  
Shona Struthers (Colleges Scotland)  
Emily Cox (Virgin Money)  
Graeme Hudson (Virgin Money)  
Laura McCluskey (Student Awards Agency Scotland, (SAAS), in place of Paul Lowe)

**By Conference Call:**

Yvonne MacDermid (Money Advice Scotland)  
Louise Macdonald (Young Scot)  
Vonnie Sandlan (NUS Scotland)  
Luke Humberstone (NUS Scotland)

**Secretariat:**

Geraldine Campbell (Scottish Government)  
Stephen White (Scottish Government)  
Jennifer Finn (Scottish Government)  
Liz Shevlin (Scottish Government)  
Lisa Keevash (Virgin Money)

**Apologies:**

Paul Lowe (Student Awards Agency Scotland)  
Erin McAuley (Scottish Youth Parliament and Student)  
Stephen Pearson (Virgin Money)

**1. Welcome**

- 1.1 Jayne-Anne Gadhia (JAG) thanked Working Group members for attending with a particular welcome to both Luke and Linda. She noted her thanks to Vonnie and Philip and wished them good luck following their departure from NUS Scotland. She also advised the group that this would be Geraldine's final meeting ahead of maternity leave and that Jennifer will be covering Geraldine's post.
- 1.2 JAG noted apologies from Paul and Erin.
- 1.3 JAG said that the group were last in contact following the decision to cancel the interim event scheduled for 25<sup>th</sup> May and also defer the launch of the consultation paper. JAG suggested the group discuss the consultation in more detail with a revised draft provided as part of the papers.

She went on to note Vonnie's comments at the last meeting on 10<sup>th</sup>

May, in particular that the Review needed to be more radical and referred to a meeting earlier that week between her and NUS Scotland. At that meeting, they discussed more radical approaches. JAG made specific reference to the discussion they had on the value of education in its own right and not only for economic purposes. In that regard, if funding for students is at the right level then it could make a real difference. JAG noted the social benefits of education, regardless of whether it reaches an end point of employment. She suggested that a progressive society could consider all students as employees and posed the question of how they should be rewarded.

JAG suggested that on that basis, and if in agreement with that thinking, then it could be considered if students should be paid the Living Wage. She further asked the group to consider what that means in terms of hours 'worked' and how many hours it is acceptable to expect students to work out side of their studies. She said that, to her, it could be assumed that a student could work 10 hours whilst studying full-time, which would mean a living wage equivalent of 25 hours per week. In financial terms, and excluding summer holidays, this would mean a total annual sum of £8,100.

JAG noted that this option would require significant additional funding, in excess of £400m for all students and £200m if current means-tests remained in place. She suggested that means-testing remains the fairest option to ensure that the poorest students receive maximum funding available. JAG went on to say that she proposes that the Review should not recommend whether students should be financed via students loans or bursaries but rather based on a proposal of the total sum a student requires to fund their studies. She said that it is a political decision on whether funding should be sourced via loans or bursaries.

JAG further commented that students could be paid a 'wage', a type of student payroll system rather than student funding. Students could decide whether the funding is paid monthly, like that of a standard employment wage. She noted that some students may prefer to manage their finances via fewer larger sums. Students could be given the option and it was important that support should be administered on a consistent basis, depending on their individual choice.

JAG posed the question of summer months support. She suggested that some students are unemployed during this period with no access to alternative support should be able to claim welfare benefits or apply to institutions to provide hardship support.

JAG asked the group what procedures and processes students should follow if a living wage option was considered. She suggested that attendance policies, for example, could be one of the conditions of support. To her, from evidence gathered to date, it seems that attendance policies on the Further Education (FE) side are onerous. JAG compared student attendance to employment whereby an individual wouldn't be expected to report to work if unwell but would be expected to provide explanations. She further added that holistic options could be considered on this issue.

JAG summarised by saying that her meeting with NUS had provided a good opportunity to discuss an alternative option which featured in the Product Design sub-groups final report as well as acknowledged the output of the Effective Administration and

Delivery sub-group. She said it also highlights the continuing challenge with interactions with the welfare system. JAG further stated that the Scottish Government should consider the economic impact of this proposal and that this Review does not have to specify whether loans or bursary funding should be provided.

JAG asked Linda, Vonnie and Philip to offer their views on their discussions.

Philip said that JAG had provided a good summary of their discussions from earlier that week. He said that this option could see the extension of free tuition policy to the student support system. He further added that this proposal formalised the social and economic good of education. That is, if an individual has chosen not to go into work but rather education, they should be funded to that level.

Philip also said that it is NUS view that current thresholds for means-testing support could be more progressive but if this option goes forward then he believes the Review to be in a good place. He further commented that it is a political decision on overall funding requirements but that the Review group shouldn't absorb that decision into their work given they are not an implementation body.

Linda said that she thinks this proposal fits well with the work on the Review of the Learner Journey and enterprise and skills review as well as ensuring that education is protected for the future.

John K acknowledged that Ministers have entered into Spending Review discussions and that there are many priority areas for funding. He said that it would be considerably easier to fund additional requirements via loans, protecting the FE bursary, but supplementing with loans. JAG agreed that there would be significant challenges but it would be Government's decision on how to fund the proposed system.

John K further said that the group cannot be blind to funding sources and would be concerned that university and college funding could be impacted if increased funding was required for the student support system. He said he was comfortable with additional funding requirements being met through the use of student loans and that it could start that way with a shift over the next 10 years or so.

Alastair said that the group are all universally supportive of students accessing funding to support their studies. He further added that the Government must decide on the balance of bursaries and loans. However, he said that £8k in funding could be provided to some students who do not require that and the affordability issue could be considered in those terms.

John K asked the group who is the 'employer' to students if viewed in this contract style. JAG suggested that she sees the state as fulfilling that role.

John G said that there were forward looking options that were simple to understand and that contracts do already exist for students and he has represented a number of full-time students working in the health service. He asked if it was the UK Living Wage or Scottish Living Wage that was being used for indicative calculations. Graeme confirmed it was the Scottish Living Wage.

John G further said that it was right to put the decision on the

bursary-loan balance back to Government. He said that if the Review were to specifically state loans should be extended then UNISON would likely be providing a minority report. He said that priorities for Government may shift but that is a political decision. However, he said that the question remains on who runs the system of student support. JAG said that any change on that could be transitional.

Russell said that he was encouraged by the proposal and had a clear understanding of the vision. He said that a social contract might however be better than an employment contract. He said that pushing the decision to Government is attractive but means that the Review group have less control over what is implemented. JAG said that the intention would be to get all students to a place of the living wage. Russell further added that Government may be able to move towards that, including depending on consequentials. Russell also said that further detail would be required on the interaction with welfare benefits so not to reduce the incomes of the most vulnerable. He said that in terms of details to be considered, that interaction should be one. JAG agreed that this area should be considered in more detail as an option is required for those in receipt of welfare benefits.

Shona said that she was pleased that the principle of this proposal had referred back to the Product Design sub-group output. She said that fairness was central to that as the system does not differentiate on where a student chooses to study but that some elements of support over summer months would be addressed. She added that institutions do not have sufficient funding to provide hardship support over summer months but said that was a level of detail that the Review group could not consider. She further added that the Government will be required to decide which of the Review's recommendations to implement.

Stephen suggested that an alternative term to the 'living wage' be considered and suggested that 'minimum income guarantee', a term already in use, might suit better.

Vonnie said that she felt more comfortable with the proposal compared to where the group had got to following the previous meeting. She further added that she understands issues in relation to sources of additional funding but that is a decision for Government. JAG specifically thanked Vonnie for her interventions at previous meetings.

Luke added that in considering a 'living wage' for students, standard wages will be taxed but suggested that students shouldn't be taxed. JAG agreed with that point and asked Luke if he was broadly supportive of the proposal. Luke said he was and that he was excited by this, particularly the focus on parity for FE and HE. He added that the issues with welfare benefit interaction and support over summer months required further consideration.

JAG said that she felt that proposing education and a support system as a contribution to society is a bigger platform for the Review to make recommendations. Philip added that it's also consistent with the ongoing work on both Widening Access and the Learner Journey. Linda also commented that this is consistent with the work of the Education and Skills Review and the messaging that education is not just for education sake. JAG added that this is an interesting conversation for society to have.

Angela said that she liked the proposal generally but the idea of claiming welfare benefits over summer months is not currently feasible for most students. She said that most students would have to either work or claim some form of hardship. She said that more work would be required on that. She suggested that those who can remain on benefits should do so, a twin-track system to the student support system. Laura said that she very much agreed with Angela on the difficulties with benefits interaction and that a deeper dive on the detail is required. JAG suggested that she was keen to take an ambitious approach with the product being designed around the detail rather than the detail designing the product.

Annag said that she was supportive of the proposal which was clear to understand.

John G suggested that support could be divided into 12 months so that financial support over summer months would be consistent with term-time.

JAG asked Russell to lead the Benefits and Support sub-group to consider the detail of welfare benefits interaction. Russell agreed.

Louise said she was also in agreement with the proposal, with studies at the heart of that as well as citizenship and the growth agenda. She also said it was consistent with the work on the Learner Journey and the policy context of employment and economic growth would send a powerful message. She further agreed that it is a political decision in terms of the bursary-loan balance but that democratic debate should be allowed to take place. Yvonne agreed with Louise's points and said she was particularly attracted to students feeling a sense of worth. She further added that Ministers must have a conversation about budgets but if education is supporting the economy then cross-policy budget work should be considered.

JAG said that she was delighted to have broad agreement from Review group members.

Alastair said that he is supportive of parity and a minimum income guarantee but in thinking about the university sector budget and demands on the college sector then to make this affordable, loans would have to be considered.

JAG suggested that further work is required at sub-group level and asked Graeme to document the proposal discussed at the meeting.

**Action: Graeme** to draft student funding proposal to share with Review Group.

Stephen further added that the group should consider work by sub groups touching on wider non-financial support, ensuring such work, akin to pastoral support is capitalised on as a final report begins to form.

## 2. Consultation

2.1 JAG referred to the revised consultation document and asked the Review group for comments on that.

Graeme said that the purpose would be to gather further evidence to refine proposals, based on the evidence already gathered. He said that the paper focussed on 4 key questions –

1. Greater alignment of financial support for students across colleges and universities with increased fairness in what all students can access;
2. A simplification and clarification of the systems used to provide financial support to students in Scotland;
3. Better communication of the funding available, including a clear explanation of the repayment terms of student loans and;
4. Further consideration of the levels of funding required for all students and the funding mix.

Graeme further added that an additional section had been provided to ask respondents for ideas – radical or innovative – to improve the student support system. He also said that it was proposed that the closing date for responses was the 11th August but that makes response analysis difficult by end September.

JAG asked the Review group if they were comfortable with the document.

Alastair said that a simple description of the current FE and HE systems would be a helpful addition. JAG said that material would be drafted and shared with Shona and Alastair in the first instance.

**Action: Graeme** to draft simple annex to consultation on current FE and HE systems.

John G said that questions 2.2 and 2.4 on administration seemed to be asking the same question and one could be removed.

**Action: Graeme** to re-work questions 2.2 and 2.4.

Shona suggested that the consultation run to the end of August to allow more time for responses. Geraldine said that could be challenging in terms of the time for results analysis but that she would look into that in more detail. Louise further added that the end of August would allow more time for students to have their voices heard.

JAG suggested that the reply date be changed to the end of August but that early responses be encouraged.

**Action: Geraldine** to re-work timetable for response analysis.

### 3. Closing and AOB

- 3.1 JAG thanked the group for attending the meeting and for their contributions. She further added that Graeme would be in touch with Review group members following the discussion.