

Education Children and Young People Committee 10 January 2024 Post School Education and Skills Reform: notes from Universities Scotland

Summary

Universities Scotland is supportive of the broad aspirations of the Withers Review; the Scottish Government's 'Purpose and Principles' exercise; and the Innovation Strategy, including Entrepreneurial Campus. We would like to see an integrated approach to taking forward these strategies, with the reform agenda also giving full weight to the Scottish Government Innovation Strategy's aspirations for universities' contribution to economic growth.

Aspects of these reviews and strategies which we hope to see reflected in the Scottish Government's post-school reform policymaking include:

- The learner centred approach.
- The emphasis on parity of esteem and recognition of the false dichotomy between 'academic' and 'vocational' education.
- The recognition of the breadth of universities' role across the economy including skills development, business innovation, company creation and leverage of investment.
- The support for lifelong learning and part-time learners.
- The call for a more flexible graduate apprenticeship model.

You can find a fuller elaboration of our position on reform issues flowing from the Withers review in Professor Steve Olivier's open letter from 19 July, available [here](#).

We want to work closely with Scottish Government to ensure that the post-school reform agenda is taken forward in ways that support universities' success and our contribution to the nation's success. We welcome Mr Dey's commitment to collaborative working in his statement of 5 December.

There are opportunities to seize, and risks to manage.

Key messages

Key overall messages from Universities Scotland about the post-school reform agenda are:

1. **Take action now to deliver for learners.** There are new learner and employer-focused skills initiatives that the Scottish Government and universities can act on now to deliver on Withers' aspirations for learners, without the need for major structural reform of the agencies, which will take years. We believe that there are quicker gains for learners and the economy through development of more agile support for work-based learning, lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling. We note

that James Withers was supportive of this when he gave evidence to the Committee

2. **If a single funding body is to be created, it must be done in a way that supports universities' success.** While we do not see an overwhelming need for a single funding body for the wide diversity of post-school provision, if SG choose to press ahead with this there are important considerations to factor in, including:
 - Any new single funding body for must have **NDPB status**. Any closer relationship with government would have risks including risks to universities' charitable status; and risks that universities would be reclassified as public bodies by the Office for National Statistics, which would be fatal to universities' financial sustainability because e.g. borrowing or reserves could not be used to invest in universities' missions.
 - **Universities' teaching, research and knowledge exchange should be funded by the same body.** All these activities are carried out in an integrated way by universities, and need to be supported in an integrated way. Research-informed teaching is a central part of the value that universities offer to students, is important to Scottish universities' international reputation, and is essential to our development of graduates with the skills and attributes that employers value in a fast-moving economy.
 - **University autonomy and academic freedom** must be protected. These are fundamental to universities' values and success.
3. **Sustainable funding is needed more than a single funding model.** Universities need adequate funding to teach and support students, especially as they have increased post-pandemic needs. We aren't getting that. The Scottish Budget for 2024/25 makes further cuts to the funding of teaching for Scottish students, compounding a real terms cut of 39% per student between 2014/15 and 2023/24. These pressures are made even more severe for most institutions by an increasingly challenging environment for international student recruitment. We can't afford reform that leads to a further 'levelling-down' of university funding.
4. **Universities are core to skills delivery.** Universities work closely with employers and are central to delivering Scotland's high-level skills, including skills for specific professions as well as the broader 'meta-skills' needed for success in a changing economy. The Scottish Government's reform agenda needs to support the full breadth of universities' contribution to developing people with the skills and attributes for success, as well as planning for specific foreseeable needs.
5. **Reform needs to be integrated.** We have yet to see how the various strands of NSET implementation, Innovation Strategy implementation school reform and post-school reform add up to an integrated programme of support for universities' contribution.
6. **Reform needs to be funded.** Any ambitious programme of change will have up-front costs, and we are concerned in case the Scottish Government attempts to drive change without the resources necessary to make it a success.