



TERTIARY EDUCATION FUTURES

ROUNDTABLE 1: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CURRENT LEARNERS

Date & Time: Thursday 11 March 2021, 14:30 to 16:00

Co-Chairs: Professor Anne Anderson FRSE & Dr Alice König (Young Academy of Scotland)

Question 1: What are the factors that lead people to enrol in college or university in Scotland?

The discussion began with a consideration of why people enter into tertiary education more generally.

- There was unanimous agreement that **TE is usually a necessary stepping stone to a desired professional destination**. This is true for both students who have just left secondary school as well as for those with existing qualifications who are looking to progress in their careers or make a shift to a different field. For example, one student spoke about having obtained a lot of industry experience but getting passed over for promotions due to lacking formal qualifications. More fundamentally, **TE can be a way for an individual to empower themselves** by opening doors to a variety of jobs and offering higher earning potential and financial independence, as well as promising some level of resilience in the face of an uncertain and everchanging economic climate.
- Learners felt that TE offers continuous opportunities to **reinvent** yourself and your career and to engage in self-improvement.
- Some learners spoke about wanting to **find a supportive community and to feel cared for** by their institution.
- It was noted that **COVID-19 had led to learners making more risk-averse decisions**, such as choosing to pursue a graduate degree directly after a bachelors degree rather than entering into an uncertain job market.

The discussion then progressed to why people choose to enrol in tertiary education in Scotland more specifically.

- Scotland was seen as an **attractive destination by some international students due to the relative affordability** of tertiary education here as compared to their home countries. Some higher education students were drawn here by the **perceived prestige of Scottish universities**, though there was some disagreement over whether their experiences have lived up to their expectations (this is discussed in more detail under question 3).
- Some students reported that **Scotland does well at publicising its tertiary education sector** and that it had been easy to obtain high-quality information on institutions and programmes.
- Some Scottish students chose to enrol at local institutions closer to home so they could benefit from a lower cost of living while studying.

Question 2: What are the factors that influence a person's choice of programme and institution?

- The reasons for choosing a particular programme or institution are highly individualised but can be influenced by:
 - o **personal interest;**
 - o relevance or **connection to a specific career destination;**
 - o the breadth of learning and ability to develop transferable skills that enable entry into a variety of careers;
 - o an individual's **family or friends;**
 - o **affordability**, including tuition fees, cost of living, and opportunities for part-time work;
 - o **accreditation;**
 - o **flexibility**, including options for remote and part-time learning that allow students to balance different priorities and demands on their time;
 - o **previous exposure to that field** from volunteering and other first-hand experiences;
 - o the quality of **research** activity;
 - o and/or the prevailing **job market**.

College or university?

- There was some discussion about the **relative merits of college versus university** and why an individual may choose one over the other. Some students faced **pressure to enrol in university over college as this was seen as the more esteemed option** by parents and teachers. It was agreed this is unfortunate as **colleges can be a more suitable learning environment for some students** and can sometimes be an easier adjustment for those coming straight from secondary school. For example, some learners stated they had struggled in a school environment and that college had given them a 'second chance.' Another student referred to having initially gone to university straight from school, a transition which she had found very difficult. She subsequently withdrew from her university course and chose to study at college instead and found that this suited her learning needs and **provided her with the necessary grounding which then enabled her to progress from college to university**. Some students mentioned that while they had not originally intended to progress from college to university, they would like to do so now, though they are wary about the costs of doing so. However, **the value of college in its own right was still recognised by students**, who valued the chance to earn qualifications, develop skills, and prepare for future career pathways.
- **Some university students admired how colleges tend to prepare students for specific careers**, whereas university degrees are not always directly applicable to any one career and so students must work harder to market their transferable knowledge and skills to employers.

Graduate degrees

- There was a view that a **graduate degree makes you a more appealing candidate** more generally, beyond just signalling that you have the necessary knowledge and skills for a particular role. In addition, participants believed that the perceived value of a bachelor's degree has fallen in recent years as more and more people attend university, and so a Masters has become necessary to differentiate yourself from other candidates and stay competitive in the job market.

Question 3: Have you got what you have expected out of your course?

- Not everyone agreed that the skills and knowledge they had gained as a result of their degree were directly relevant to their intended career. Some felt that **elective modules and practical training sessions (e.g. in a particular software) were more useful** as students could tailor them to their respective areas of interest and use them to hone practical skills that are more likely to be required on the job.
- Some students felt their school had **oversold the value of their programme**, promising work placement opportunities and professional contacts that did not always materialise. These students then had to **take their own initiative if they wanted to develop their skills and networks** beyond what was offered in the classroom, such as by reaching out to industry professionals to seek advice and opportunities. This was a view shared by both college and university students.
- For some students attending **internationally renowned universities**, it was felt that these programmes offered the expected academic rigour but sometimes **fell short in preparing students to work in their chosen fields** due to a lack of emphasis on practical skills.

Transitions

- There was agreement that **prospective or incoming learners are not always adequately prepared for the realities of TE and can have trouble adjusting**. This can apply to both first-time learners as well as those who have been out of a school environment for an extended period of time. Nonetheless, there is often still an **overwhelming expectation** – from teachers, family, and society in general - that students will attend some form of TE straight out of secondary school and that TE is a prerequisite for success in life. **This contrasts with the reported experience of several roundtable participants, who commented on the value of having had practical work experience in the interim before enrolling in their current programmes** (for example, in helping them determine what career they wish to pursue). In general, there was a sense that **students deserve better support for their mental health and wellbeing as they navigate what can be a challenging and overwhelming time in their lives**.

Mature students

- It was remarked that institutions can sometimes **overlook the needs and aspirations of mature students**. For example, one individual remarked that many of the opportunities and development programmes he tried to apply for were geared towards 16-24 year olds, excluding him as a mature student who had returned to college at a later age.

Guidance

- Some students spoke about the need for **better academic advising** so they can have a clearer understanding of which courses are needed for which careers; likewise, students wanted to know how degrees can be flexibly applied to a variety of different progression pathways. Some students spoke about feeling anxiety around course selection, only to discover that some fields welcome candidates from a variety of backgrounds.

COVID-19

- Several participants reported a **disconnect between what they were told their programmes would offer and their actual experiences in the context of COVID-19**. There was a sense of frustration that institutions had prioritised students' physical return to campus in order to secure revenue and **had not been transparent** in explaining how students' experiences might differ in practice. Some students considered it unfair that schools were not offering refunds and felt an overall **lack of empathy** for students' situations.
- One student representative indicated that **several people in their programme stated would have rather deferred than enrol this year if they had known just how different their experience would be**.
- Several indicated they had **not been able to develop all of the practical skills** they had expected or wanted to gain and worried this could be detrimental when they enter the workforce.
- While there was acknowledgement that the sector faced challenges in predicting how the school year would unfold, it was felt that schools could have experimented with new technologies and approaches early on as a contingency measure in the event in-person instruction was reduced. As it turned out, **many institutions missed an opportunity to transform their teaching and learning through innovative means** such as augmented and virtual reality; more fundamentally, it was reported that **available technology and software could often be unreliable** and buckle under the pressure of so many students accessing it at once.

Question 4: What has been the most valuable aspect of your course?

- Participants cited **influential or engaging guest speakers, industry connections, and dedicated staff** as some of the most valuable aspects of their TE experiences. **Practical experiences** were regarded as important for exposing learners to the realities of their chosen career field and for bringing theoretical concepts to life, though the quality of these practical experiences differed across programmes.

Social connections

- Participants indicated that the **social aspects** of TE are vitally important for student wellbeing and for engendering confidence, yet their **significance can often get overlooked**. This can include a range of experiences, from socialising with peers, the ability to become involved with student associations and societies, joining sports teams, and opportunities for on-campus employment. From an academic standpoint, students valued peer-to-peer learning and interaction. Students referred to having been able to use other students as a sounding board and for peer-to-peer motivation prior to lockdown, especially in preparing for assignments.
- TE can also be an **opportunity for individuals to encounter people of different backgrounds** and broaden their worldview. On the other hand, there can still be a **perceived sense of elitism** surrounding TE that can discourage some people from applying as they do not believe they belong in that environment, which keeps colleges and universities from becoming as diverse as they could be.

Life experience

- A student mentioned that living away from home had provided her with life skills she might otherwise have not acquired. The experience had also helped her better appreciate where she was from and her own preferences (e.g. coming from a large city to live and study in a small town).

International study

- Although the topic of international students was not discussed in-depth, it was felt that **Scotland should work to make TE study more affordable for all international students** as well as **introduce avenues for them to remain in Scotland** after graduation, as both of these factors would increase Scotland's appeal to prospective students from overseas. In a similar vein, domestic students **lamented the loss of the Erasmus+ programme**, with some citing it as having been a primary motivator for their enrolment in a specific programme.

TE system of the future

- Scotland's TE sector should expand upon its global links and provide clearer paths for students to pursue work and study abroad opportunities; **TE should prepare you to work or live anywhere in the world**, in recognition of the increasing globalisation of society.

To what extent will your future plans make use of what you have learned during your current course?

- Several students referred to intending to **progress from college to university**. Some said they would continue to look for opportunities to **learn and to develop their skillsets beyond their current programmes**.
- A student referred to the opportunities provided by post-graduate level courses to **gain sector/industry-specific skills and experiences**.

COVID-19 discussion

Learning

- Students **positively acknowledged lecturers' efforts** in successfully delivering remote teaching and learning, such as by offering greater flexibility around assignments.
- **Not all students were dissatisfied with their learning experiences during COVID-19**. One student said that while you needed to take greater ownership of your learning under the current circumstances, it was still possible to have a meaningful educational experience. Some students acknowledged some of the **benefits of studying during COVID-19**, such as having fewer distractions due to lockdown or the greater use of smaller tutorial sessions that afforded more opportunities for discussion with their coursemates.
- **Others struggled with the realities of remote learning**, reporting decreased attention spans, trouble keeping up with the pace of teaching, difficulty in asking questions, varying approaches to remote teaching across different lecturers, and physical impacts such as migraines, back pain, and eye strain.
- There was reference to **digital disadvantage**, not only in terms of access to hardware, but also to course-specific software and tools. A music student referred to the costs incurred (and also the space constraints) of having to purchase a keyboard as she was not able to access her institution's music facilities.

- The shift to **blended or online learning sometimes meant that those with additional support needs were left behind**; the criteria for accessing additional support can be limited, meaning that some students that require such support were unable to benefit from it.
- One of the **aspects students missed most was the 'real-time' feedback and reassurance from lecturers** that they would receive in a live learning setting; whereas students are constantly offered some level of informal assessment of their progress in a classroom setting, there are now much longer intervals between these feedback sessions, making it more difficult for students to know if they are on the right track
 - However, some students spoke positively about an increase in the level of individualised support available to them (e.g. more 1:1s with instructors).
- Overall, there was **agreement that some level of blended learning should likely persist going forward.**
 - Retaining some element of online learning has benefits, such as promoting attendance, allowing students to access lectures in their own time, and bringing in higher calibre guest speakers through livestreaming.
- COVID-19 has illustrated the **need for programmes to modernise**, both in their use of technology but also in the design of their curricula, which some students felt are falling behind industry expectations. This includes providing university staff with support to upskill their digital skills, as the transition to online learning has revealed a lack of capacity in this area in some institutions.

Exams and assessments

- COVID-19 has revealed some of the **shortcomings of our present examination and assessment system**, and perhaps one of the most important and enduring changes that could result from the pandemic will be a fundamental reimagining of how we assess learning.
 - In general, exams were seen as **a crude means of assessing learning**, with too much focus placed on select skills and knowledge and less on a holistic assessment of the individual. Learning for learning's sake is overshadowed by the need to perform well on exams to progress to further destinations or gain a necessary qualification.
 - Current methods of assessment can be difficult for those with **disabilities or additional support needs** to use.
 - Exams for more **creative programmes** can be too rigid and stifle student creativity.
 - The use of **'24-hour exams'** during the pandemic has allowed some students to worry less about the rote memorisation of facts and devote more time to developing cogent arguments and demonstrating a deeper level of understanding.
 - Changes to grading under COVID (e.g. assigning a 'pass/fail' in lieu of a letter grade) across some programmes might make it difficult for some students to highlight areas where they have excelled to potential employers.
 - While open book exams were welcomed by some students, they can be graded to a harsher standard and so be counterproductive in some cases.
 - Those students undertaking programmes with **practical elements** were worried their command of practical skills (e.g. clinical skills) has not been adequately assessed during the pandemic.

Isolation and student wellbeing

- There is a need to **support those living alone and those in student accommodation who may not see other people face-to-face for long periods of time.** Students felt there had

been a lack of support during the pandemic or that the level of support provided was inconsistent.

- University leaders need to be better at connecting with students and keeping them updated on developments.
- The pandemic has been particularly isolating for **international students**, many of whom come to Scotland without an existing support network and rely on in-person interaction to make friends and develop a sense of community. Several students said the chance to live in Scotland was a significant factor in deciding to study here and they were disappointed to have been unable to explore the country - or even their own cities – thus far.
- Questions were raised about **the role of the lecturer**, particularly with respect to offering **support for mental health**.
 - Does an institution's duty of pastoral care extend down to the level of the lecturer? Should all lecturers be mandated to receive mental health first aid training? At a minimum, it was stated that **institutions should ensure mental health services are better joined-up** so that students receive consistent messaging about the resources they have available to them and those seeking help do not slip through the cracks.
 - This was balanced by a consideration of the already considerable workloads faced by many lecturers; this could perhaps be alleviated by **employing greater numbers of teaching assistants and other support staff**.