

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE / ROYAL SOCIETY OF EDINBURGH UNIVERSITIES AND SCOTLAND ROUNDTABLE

Introduction

- 1 On 2 February 2021 the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), Scotland's National Academy, hosted a virtual roundtable with members of the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee (SAC). The discussion, held under the Chatham House Rule, brought together 16 RSE Fellows and Members of the Young Academy of Scotland (YAS) with a wide range of disciplinary expertise and practitioner experience spanning academia, research, innovation, business and management to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into Universities and Scotland.¹
- 2 This summary report of the discussion has been prepared by the RSE and submitted to the SAC as formal evidence. The following points are a synthesis of issues discussed at the roundtable and do not necessarily represent the views of the Royal Society of Edinburgh or Young Academy of Scotland.

Current Environment

- 3 Scotland's university sector is currently experiencing something of a perfect storm with the ongoing major disruption caused by the global pandemic coupled with the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the impact on learning, teaching and research, and the sustainability of university finances. The expertise and research capacity within Scotland's universities have made a significant contribution to supporting the recovery from the pandemic, and universities and their staff have adapted quickly to minimise the impact of the pandemic on learning and teaching. However, the current circumstances bring into sharp focus the need to consider the resilience of Scotland's university system.

RSE/YAS Project on Tertiary Education Futures

- 4 The Tertiary Education Futures project is being undertaken jointly by RSE and YAS.² It will bring together a wide range of perspectives including learners, practitioners and employers to discuss the future of tertiary education in Scotland. The programme of work will stimulate wide-ranging debate and discussion on the role and social, cultural and economic value of tertiary education, and contribute fresh thinking on the future of Scotland's tertiary education system.

Internationalisation and Marketisation

- 5 While the internationalisation of tertiary education has brought many benefits to learners, institutions and Scotland more broadly, some concerns were expressed about an increased marketisation of higher education which views education as a commodity and learners as customers, and how this influences institutional behaviour. Some concerns were also expressed about the relationship between universities' international ambitions and activities and the protection of human rights.
- 6 The international education field is incredibly competitive, particularly so for online and remote learning. It will be important that Scotland remains competitive in this area and universities adequately plan for the reality of fewer international students physically attending campuses.

¹ <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/471/universities-and-scotland/>

² The Young Academy of Scotland has already hosted several discussions on different elements of tertiary education. The outputs are available at: <https://www.youngacademyofscotland.org.uk/category/blog/higher-education-futures/>

- 7 There is a far-reaching question around the extent to which international student tuition fees cross-subsidise other core university activity including research, and how sustainable this is. The Australian system may provide an instructive illustration of the risks faced, as much of the system – especially the research-intensive part of the Australian sector – became over-dependent on overseas fee income, particularly from China. There are long term strategic risks of making financial sustainability of research entirely dependent on overseas fee income.
- 8 A decrease in the number of international students at Scottish universities will also have significant non-financial impacts; impacts that will potentially not become evident for decades. Connections formed at universities last a lifetime and can guide people's choices for international trade and research. Losing these connections for Scotland will potentially result in a decrease in the soft power Scotland projects on the world stage.

Changing Methods of Learning

- 9 The pandemic has necessitated a move towards greatly increased online learning and ways of working, not only across universities but society at large. While there are significant benefits to this, including widening access for various groups (although not for others) and in breaking-down geographic barriers, there will always be an important place for face-to-face teaching and peer-to-peer learning. A significant issue for institutions and learners during the pandemic has been the lack of practical work that has been possible. Student learning, particularly in STEM disciplines, is augmented by the practical work they undertake.
- 10 It appears likely the future will involve a significant amount of blended learning for students. Embracing a move towards this, building on the experience of the past year, could present Scotland with the opportunity for a strong competitive edge.
- 11 Covid-19 has also accelerated the way institutions look at mission-oriented learning, which facilitates students making connections between different subject areas to address complex challenges. Universities are similarly giving greater consideration to interdisciplinary learning and community curricula. This serves to strengthen the relationship between tertiary education providers and society. The future education system will need to be one which prepares students for complex issues in an interdisciplinary way to allow them to tackle the challenges of a world.
- 12 The move from in-person learning to greater on-line engagement has also resulted in the nature of the campus experience changing. It is possible that going forward we will see a reduction in international in-person exchange and the international experience becoming more siloed and transactional, with less genuine student interaction.

Brexit

- 13 The full extent of the impacts of the UK withdrawing from the European Union is not yet clear. Some concerns have been expressed that being outside of the EU will, at the very least, make the hiring and retention of researchers and academics more complicated for universities, with additional administrative bureaucracy and associated costs being cited.
- 14 The UK leaving the Erasmus+ programme is regrettable and will adversely affect both students and staff through the loss of two-way mobility. This impact will be felt particularly keenly in Scotland due to the higher take up of the scheme relative to population compared to other nations of the UK. While the Erasmus scheme is highly valuable in terms of enhancing the skills and capacity of all students who participate, regardless of discipline, it has a particular importance for linguistic and cultural capacity that offers an essential resource to the Scottish economy and society in a globalised world.
- 15 While the Turing scheme brought forward by the UK Government should be given time to prove its worth, it is not yet up and running. Irrespective of any future success it may have, there may be an interim period where exchange of students and researchers simply does not occur. Furthermore, the Turing scheme is not a genuine exchange programme comparable with Erasmus+, with greater numbers leaving the UK under the Turing scheme than will enter to participate in its Higher Education institutions. The Turing scheme will require long-term commitment and financial support from the UK Government to provide certainty to institutions, staff and students, especially when Erasmus+ has operated as a seven-year programme.

- 16** The agreement for the UK to be able to participate in Horizon Europe as an associate country is to be welcomed. While Scotland has traditionally done very well at securing competitive research funding from the EU, analysis has shown that the UK's annual share of EU research funding has fallen by half a billion Euros since 2015 and there has been a 40% drop in UK applications to Horizon Europe.³ Substantial work will be needed to encourage UK researchers to take up the opportunities that association to Horizon Europe provides. There must be genuine paths towards continued working with European colleagues and the value of Scottish institutions and researchers working alongside European partners cannot be overstated.
- 17** It was noted that European Structural and Investment Funds have helped to build research capacity and links with businesses, particularly in less research-intensive areas of Scotland. However, details on the long-awaited Shared Prosperity Fund aimed at replacing EU Structural Funds, are still not available.

Staff Welfare

- 18** Some concerns exist over the welfare of staff within Scotland's universities. Concern was expressed about the 'hollowing-out' of resources within institutions leading to individual staff being expected to deliver more activity and the impact this has on staff wellbeing. While this was a significant issue pre-Covid-19, the pandemic has served to exacerbate the problem of an already burnt-out workforce. University staff have shown themselves to be exceptionally resilient and quick to move learning online, but this has undoubtedly taken a toll. Workload and stress levels are too high for many staff, which adversely impacts their ability to conduct top-level research and in turn impacts recruitment and retention. There was particular concern about the availability and precarious nature of career pathways for post-doctoral researchers and academics.

Competition vs Collaboration

- 19** There is a view that Scotland's university sector works more collaboratively than in the UK more widely, this includes the opportunities offered by the Scottish Enhancement Themes, the cross-institutional research pools and innovation centres, and PhD doctoral training centres. However, there continues to be concern that resources are being lost to unnecessary competition between institutions. There was a clear view that funding models need to be adapted to encourage greater levels of collaboration. There exists genuine opportunity for Scotland to work as an integrated system.

University Finances

- 20** Universities are complex organisations with complex financial arrangements. They take on multiple roles as charities, businesses, community and civic anchors. They operate at different scales simultaneously – Scotland, UK and internationally. Ensuring Scotland's universities are financially viable is vital with successful universities most likely to be those adopting blended models of securing income. Institutions which can attract a geographically diverse range of students, produce world class research, and maintain strong links to industry are likely to be the ones which thrive.
- 21** The biggest single action that could be taken to assist universities would be the removal of structural underfunding which has increased universities' reliance on income from international students. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) could work with universities to make sure that a broad range of excellence exists within Scotland but does not need to exist at every university. Within existing budgets, resources could be allocated in a different way to facilitate this, although funding would be required to support this transition.
- 22** With the increasing number of international students moving online, the reduction in income both to the institutions themselves and also the local and regional economy has been striking and underlines a fragility to the current financial set up of many institutions.

³ Brexit uncertainty harming UK science, Royal Society, London, 16 October 2019 <https://royalsociety.org/news/2019/10/brexit-uncertainty-harming-UK-science/>

Scotland's Place in the UK Higher Education and Research Landscape

- 23** There is a perception in Scotland of a “Team Scotland” collaborative approach between institutions. Scotland wants to be open for students and needs to be able to attract and retain students, researchers, and staff from around the world.
- 24** It is important that the Scottish and UK Governments are able to work closely together to address major challenges, for example on the energy transition in the north east of Scotland. Successfully tackling similar societal challenges will require both strong collaboration around funding but also clear strategy. Germany serves as a useful illustration of robust partnerships between the Federal State, the Regional States and the Higher Education sector. It was noted that Scotland has performed well in securing funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) *Strength in Places Fund*⁴ which demonstrates how Scottish industry, business and research organisations can come together to support regional economic development. This success has also helped consortia leverage funds from other sources.
- 25** There was recognition that while the Office for Students (OfS) primarily focuses on regulatory arrangements for England, it is vital that the OfS considers the impact of its proposals on all areas of the UK given the respective national landscapes for higher education. There was concern that the current approach does not encourage collaborative working across the four nations of the UK and that an all-sector UK approach is needed.

- 26** Questions also persist as to whether Scotland has a prominent enough role and sufficient influence within UKRI strategy and decision-making. While UKRI has responsibility for research across the whole of the UK, within it sits Research England. However, the research funding councils and bodies in the devolved nations are not formally represented in UKRI decision-making structures. Therefore, careful consideration needs to be given to UKRI culture, arrangements and structures to ensure that it is able to fully take account of the needs, priorities and contributions of Scotland and the other devolved nations.

Additional Information

Any enquiries about the Advice Paper should be addressed to Craig Denham (cdenham@therse.org.uk).

Responses are published on the RSE website (<https://www.rse.org.uk/>)

The Royal Society of Edinburgh, Scotland's National Academy, is Scottish Charity No. SC000470

Advice Paper (Royal Society of Edinburgh)
ISSN 2024-2694

⁴ UKRI Strength in Places Fund
<https://www.ukri.org/our-work/our-main-funds/strength-in-places-fund/>