

Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Universities and Scotland, HC 673](#)

Wednesday 21 October 2020

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Mhairi Black; Andrew Bowie; Deidre Brock; Wendy Chamberlain; Alberto Costa; Jon Cruddas; Sally-Ann Hart.

Questions 30 - 58

Witnesses

I: Matt Crilly, President, NUS Scotland, and Mary Senior, Scotland Official, University and College Union Scotland.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Matt Crilly and Mary Senior.

Q30 **Chair:** Welcome to the Scottish Affairs Committee and the second evidence session in our inquiry into universities and Scotland. We have two excellent guests who are going to join us to give evidence and help us with this inquiry today. I will let them introduce themselves.

Matt Crilly: Thank you very much for having me today. My name is Matt Crilly. I am the President of the National Union of Students in Scotland. We are a federation of over 60 student associations in Scotland and collectively we represent about half a million students in the country. We welcome the opportunity to be able to speak to you today and to submit evidence to your Committee. We are obviously facing major challenges to education and students have unfortunately found themselves at the brunt of the coronavirus pandemic with the return to campuses. But more broadly, today we hope to be able to chat a bit about the funding of our education system and making sure that we have sustainable public investment in our universities.

Mary Senior: My name is Mary Senior and I am from the University and College Union, UCU, which is a trade union representing over 9,000 staff in Scotland's universities. That is academic staff and academic-related or professional support staff in the various universities in Scotland. Like Matt, we are pleased to be here to give evidence to you today. Education and Scotland's universities are really important to us as a nation in Scotland, to our economy, society, communities and individuals. The Scottish Funding Council's report, which came out yesterday, describes them as anchor institutions and I think it is important to bear that in mind.

As Matt said, the pandemic has had a massive impact on education and universities. It has exposed some of the challenges, particularly some of the funding challenges, which we already knew were there and some of the challenges in the model of funding that we use in Scotland and how that relates to the UK too. I look forward to exploring those issues with you. The pandemic has magnified some of the issues that our members have, particularly with workloads, which were already exponentially high and are exacerbated by the pandemic. The pandemic has had a damaging effect in many ways on precarity and job security in the sector.

Like the NUS, we welcome the opportunity to speak to you today and we are looking forward to your report. Let's hope it can make a positive difference to all of the issues around funding and how we value and support education in Scotland and across the UK.

Q31 **Chair:** Thank you both very much for being very clear and concise with your opening statements. I will get right down to it. You guys represent staff and students in the university sector right across Scotland. We have set up this inquiry to look at some of the particular issues and challenges



in the funding envelope to Scottish universities. What, in your view, are the major challenges that are facing students and university and college staff in funding as we go into this new academic year?

Mary Senior: As I alluded to in my opening remarks, I think the pandemic has exposed the challenges with the funding model. Universities in Scotland—but to a far greater extent in the rest of the UK—have become more marketised and reliant upon commercial income. Scotland has not escaped that, given the role that UK tuition fees and international student fee income play. We have had funding challenges and we have seen the level of public funding from the Scottish Government to institutions drop and plateau over recent years. I hope that the Committee is looking at the Audit Scotland report that came out last year. It showed a 12% drop in the level of funding that universities received up to 2017-18 in those seven years.

That has meant that universities have had to rely on commercial income and international student tuition fee income. That is precisely where it has been so questionable, problematic and unclear about the income coming over because of the pandemic. International students have not known if they could travel or get here and universities rely on commercial income from letting out accommodation, conferences and all of that. That has been particularly problematic.

A concern for us is that the money that funds the core teaching grant does not fully meet the cost of delivering teaching, so that is a real problem. I think it is a UK problem. The level of GDP that the UK puts into higher education is significantly lower than other comparable countries such as France and Germany. I hope the Committee will look at that.

Q32 **Chair:** I have the Scottish Funding Council report in front of me now and you are right, it says that there is a cut of 11%. In response, I see that colleges and universities are asking for a £25 million per year cash input to try to meet some of the additional costs going forward. Would that be sufficient to get you through some of the difficulties that you are experiencing now?

Mary Senior: We need a fresh look at how we value education and what we put into education. The UCU welcomes the fact that Scottish-domiciled students do not pay tuition fees and up until this year EU students have not either. For us, the importance of accessing education on your ability to participate rather than your ability to pay is absolutely fundamental. We also welcome the fact that in the last couple of weeks the Scottish Conservative Party has dropped its commitment to tuition fees being level. It is very helpful that we have that consensus among the political parties in Scotland. Now we would like them to put fresh eyes on and robust consideration of how we properly fund education to level up the amount of public funding that goes into higher education so that we can meet other countries in the OECD.



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Q33 **Chair:** Thank you for that. Is that roughly your view, Mr Crilly? Are there any particular issues of funding that you want to highlight at the beginning of this session that are impacting particularly on students as we go forward? Are the deficits that are projected across the university sector going to have an impact on the people you represent?

Matt Crilly: Yes. Mary has touched on it a great deal there and I think the analysis from Mary and the UCU is correct. The pandemic, the coronavirus, has shown that our institutions have funding problems and funding of education in Scotland is not perfect. As Mary said, it has become increasingly marketised. In some ways, students in Scotland were pretty lucky. I am sitting in front of you today. I am an undergraduate and I do not have to pay tuition fees. I know some of my counterparts across the UK are not in that fortunate position, but a lot of education in Scotland is built upon tuition fees. We have become increasingly reliant on international student fees. Some international students are paying £20,000 a year to study at our institutions.

The pandemic has shown that this model is vulnerable; it is vulnerable to the market. If you marketise our institutions, they are vulnerable to downfalls in the market and ultimately it is students who are left paying the cost. We think there needs to be a fresh approach. It would be great for us if Governments could make more funding available for our institutions, protecting that.

Q34 **Chair:** What do you make of what has been offered to the university sector so far by the UK and the Scottish Governments? We hear of the £25 million package that you are looking for and also the UK Government have announced £7.2 million in 20 research projects across the UK. What do you make of what you have observed thus far in the response to this particular issue?

Matt Crilly: There have been some quite positive investments. Like you said, there have been quite a number of investments in research funding, making that funding available to institutions. But of course we think there probably needs to be more investment in the student side of our institutions. If you are talking to us about what the lack of funding in our institutions is, it is that they don't necessarily have a sufficient number of, say, mental health counsellors to get through this pandemic. There is not necessarily the support staff to help deal with student enquiries or when students are struggling or their class sizes have become bigger over the years so that academics are struggling to keep up with the number of people they are teaching. These structural issues have direct impacts on the experiences that students have going through our institutions.

Q35 **Chair:** I am interested in your view on this, Ms Senior, because you particularly mentioned the changing nature of the funding package for universities to the provision of services, like the hosting of conferences. There are many more strange and different things than were done when I was a student, back a long, long time ago. What has brought this on? Has



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there been a push towards universities, higher education institutions, trying to provide these sort of services to plug some of the funding gaps and arrangements?

Mary Senior: There has been a reduction in the level of public funding that is going into universities. To be fair, the Scottish Government have been encouraging universities to diversify their funding. We take “diversify” to mean that commercialisation, to look to other funders such as international students, conference income and commercial income. That is what the Minister had been saying to us prior to Covid. I think what Covid has said to us in so many walks of life is the importance of the state and the importance of investing in essential public services. If we see education as one of those, it is so crucial. Can I respond to some of the points you raised with Matt about the funding packages that have come forward?

Chair: Yes, please.

Mary Senior: The £75 million that the Scottish Government brought forward in about May—which seems like a lifetime ago—was incredibly welcome because it was new money that was able to come into the sector in Scotland very quickly and give the signal that it was important that they should keep staff on. We were also pleased that the Government and the funding council listened to us. There was specific mention of supporting early career staff in that funding and that was incredibly welcome. Our union at the UK level has been pushing the UK Government to do more. One of the concerns about the UK packages is that a lot of it is not new money. It is money that has been brought forward early or it is loans and if universities already have high levels of debt or loans, they are not going to be able to take that forward.

Another concern about the UK Government’s packages is that they were tightly tied to some sort of strict criteria. We recognise that universities contribute to economic development, but the funding was really tightly tied to certain outputs that might have meant that it could not be used in all cases. As a union, we are calling on the UK Government to do far more and I think they should.

The final point is that all of the funding that has come forward to date has been for research and, as we have said already, the pressure is very much on the teaching budgets and the teaching grants. That pressure is there, even more so because we have seen increases in student numbers, certainly Scottish-domiciled UK numbers, because of the issues with Highers, SQA, and the issues with the A-levels. There is pressure on the teaching budget and no funding from either Government has adequately addressed the fact that we need to support teaching and the teaching grant in universities.

Chair: We will definitely be getting stuck into most of what you have said. We want to look at tuition fees and international students and we will be coming back to them. I know that Mr Bowie wants to come in at



this point about the pandemic and universities.

- Q36 **Andrew Bowie:** Hi, Mary and Matt. Thank you very much for joining us this afternoon. I am going to focus more on the financial situation facing individual students and how that is affecting our universities as a whole rather than the financial situation facing the higher education institutions.

Before I do that, Matt, as head of NUS, are you able to give us an update on the situation for students in Scotland? About a month ago we made headlines with the situation of students being asked to stay at home, not go out and so on. Can you give us an update on what it is like being a student in Scotland in 2020? It is very different to being a student in Scotland in any other year.

Matt Crilly: Thank you, Andrew. You are right, it is very, very different being a student this year. To touch on some of the economic circumstances that students are facing, it is incredibly challenging. The areas of the economy that are being hit by the coronavirus—things like the hospitality sector, pubs, restaurants, bars—are the areas of the economy that students typically rely on for their part-time work. I know many students benefited from the furlough scheme at the beginning of the pandemic. They have been brought back, perhaps have fewer hours, some have been laid off, some have struggled to get the work that they would normally rely on.

It is a very precarious financial situation for students at the moment. Our studies show that 60% of students rely on part-time work, but I am sure there is extra research to be done precisely on that. Built into the student support system in Scotland is a discussion about how students should not work any more than 10 hours a week alongside their studies, but many students rely on that work, sometimes more than 10 hours a week. We think the cost of learning and the student support system in Scotland should be evaluated this year. Clearly students might not be able to rely on the part-time work that they usually would and we think that there should be some changes to the student support system to reflect that reality.

On a broader point, the situation that students are facing this year is totally unprecedented. We are dealing with a global pandemic and all elements of society are in a difficult boat, but just recently I was a 17-year-old starting university and moving away for the first time, which is already daunting and scary enough. This year it is a totally different ball game and students have had to rely on different modes of learning and teaching, online learning and online teaching for the first time and not necessarily being able to socialise and make friends at their new universities. Students are facing a great number of challenges at the moment and we think we should be doing all we can to try to support them through it.

- Q37 **Andrew Bowie:** I promise, Chairman, I will get back to the questions on finances, but how have your members found the remote teaching, digital



teaching, Mary? They have had to adapt and change almost overnight to how they deliver lectures and seminars and inform, teach and engage with students. How are your members finding it?

Mary Senior: You are right about overnight. It literally was overnight in March to transpose lectures into virtual presentations and tutorials and one-to-ones in the same way. It is entirely possible. Some of the narrative in the press misses that you don't need to lose the quality. The fact that we are sitting here today virtually having a really in-depth, probing discussion shows that it is entirely possible to operate seminars and tutorials in this way, and that is what is happening. We have quite a number of agreements in institutions on lecture capture and those things. This has meant that they have absolutely needed to come into play.

I think what it has meant to our members is increasing workloads. The "blended learning" language that is in the guidance for us is a bit too ambiguous and is creating problems. Many universities require our members to go on to campus to deliver in-person teaching. That is creating some challenges, particularly if you are delivering it to a class where you also have to talk into your laptop because some of the students are self-isolating and not in the room, possibly wearing face coverings if you are delivering it in person because of concerns. That is where we get the tensions and the difficulties.

Our members are concerned about being on campus because we know the virus is prevalent and is rising. When we were talking about it in August/September we knew that the virus was most prevalent in younger people, who tend to be students, and there was a great deal of anxiety and concern from our members. That has not been resolved in all too many places unfortunately, so it is adding to the problems.

Q38 **Andrew Bowie:** What feedback have you had from the UCU members about the financial situation facing them as deliverers of education on campuses? There are 19 higher education institutions. How has the support for them differed across Scotland or has it been very much a sort of "We're all in it together" mentality?

Mary Senior: That is a very good question. It is really patchy. We have had some institutions that looked at the books—or some of them didn't even look at the books—and they leapt to voluntary severance schemes, making redundancies. We saw that in Napier, primarily focused on support staff, but we also have Heriot-Watt looking to lose 130 staff. Our members were deeply alarmed. We felt it was way too premature and does nothing for morale. When we are in recession, and the Scottish Government's Advisory Group on Economic Recovery talked about an education-led recovery, it does not make sense for universities to be throwing people on to the scrapheap. Surely we should be creating more places for older learners as well as younger learners to participate in education. The fact that we have these redundancy threats at Heriot-Watt University is problematic.



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As a union, unfortunately we have had no choice but to conduct an industrial action ballot and we got the results yesterday. I was really proud because it is quite difficult conducting an industrial action ballot in a global pandemic. You probably know that the Trade Union Act makes us do postal ballots and given the state of the post—and given that usually when you are conducting a ballot you would go to the members' workplace because that is more consistent, but if people are not in work as much, did they keep their home addresses up to date?—I was having massive panics—

Q39 Andrew Bowie: The Trade Union Act was never framed with a global pandemic locking down vast swathes of the economy in mind, so that may be where we have dropped the ball on that one, but I get the difficulties that you face.

I know that Pete will be moving me on, as he always does, but I want to ask Matt on that. We have spoken about financial issues facing members of the UCU, possibly voluntary severance and so on. You touched briefly on how, for a large number of students, the money they earn in these part-time jobs, many of them in the hospitality sector, is what allows them to continue studying. They rely on that. They are not lucky enough to have other sources of income to help them continue to study, live at university in halls or whatever. It is to pay the rent. Are you seeing a rise in students in financial difficulty as a result of the other action that we had to take across the country? What would the NUS like to see to try to resolve that or take action on it?

Matt Crilly: It happened almost immediately when the pandemic hit, because a lot of our members found themselves on zero-hour contracts and stuff like that and their hours dropped immediately. At the start of the pandemic some employers decided to put their staff on furlough, others just let employees go immediately. It was almost instantaneous, where students began contacting me in my previous role at the University of Strathclyde, but also the NUS detail on the financial situation that they faced. At the time we were glad that the Scottish Government made some interventions to make some additional hardship funding available to universities. Students could apply for additional support from the institution directly if they found themselves in financial difficulties and that was really welcome.

But we think there probably needs to be more structural change. In the short term, I think there probably needs to be more hardship funding made available directly to institutions so that students can apply and notify their university if they are going through financial difficulties and are able to be—

Q40 Andrew Bowie: Matt, you obviously represent students at all Scotland's universities. Have all of them risen to the challenge and supported their students financially in the way that you would like to see?



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Matt Crilly: It is difficult to say because it is such a large structural problem. Many of the discretionary funds are Government-based. We have seen some institutions go above and beyond for that, so they have tried to reach out to their alumni networks, their graduate networks and get people who used to go to university 20 years ago to chip in and try to support current students. We really welcome institutions looking out for their students and taking part in these fundraising efforts. However, I don't think the solution to mass hardship is charity efforts from institutions. I think we need to see some more intervention here, more immediate hardship funding and a wider look at the student support system in Scotland. There is going to be a real problem if we are relying on students working 10 hours a week alongside their studies.

Could I touch on some of the points that you and Mary discussed about the online learning and online teaching?

Andrew Bowie: Yes.

Matt Crilly: Mary is right. It was a really quick turnaround. It was almost immediate for many institutions. They had to move online as quickly as possible and I think staff put in a lot of work to deliver that and it was really disruptive for students and staff. Students were moving around the country, some were flying back home to their home countries and a great deal of work went in. But I think the structural funding issues of our education played a part in what we have seen over the last couple of months. I think the reliance on international student fee income influenced some of the decisions that institutions have taken.

Throughout the summer we were arguing that if teaching can be delivered online in an easy way, teaching should take place online. We should be focusing in on practical subjects, practice-based, lab-based teaching to make sure that if it needs to be delivered in person, it can safely be delivered in person. As Mary said, the guidance was a little too open to interpretation. It allowed for blended learning. Again, I think it comes back to the structural funding issues in the system. There was an encouragement for students to come back to campus and to make themselves available for in-person teaching even when that did not need to happen.

Some students were really frustrated because it had not been sufficiently communicated to them. Some of them arrived back because they were told to make themselves available for in-person teaching only to find out that it was actually online learning and teaching. They felt that they had been mis-sold an experience, essentially. I think that comes back to the structural funding issues in our system that drove that.

Andrew Bowie: Matt, cheers. Mary, thank you so much. I am conscious that I have taken up a lot of time so I will pass back to the Chairman.

Chair: To reiterate, the work that has been done online is fantastic and one of the biggest innovations we have seen in teaching. I say that from



experience as my partner is a lecturer at the University of Highlands and Islands and the amount of work that goes in to deliver these courses is a real credit to your staff, Mary. I pass that on to you as my own personal observation. We will now go across to Wendy Chamberlain, who represents the fine university of St Andrews.

Q41 Wendy Chamberlain: Thanks to both witnesses for your time today. What I am hearing already is fascinating in relation to my own constituency. I am going to move the conversation away from Covid for a time on to funding and particularly funding of EU students. In the Scottish Parliament Education Committee meeting on 2 September the Minister said that the latest UCAS figures at that time showed that the applications from EU students were down by 5%. What impact do you think the introduction of tuition fees on EU students is likely to have? Are there particular institutions that are likely to be more impacted than others and potentially might it help deal with the perception that exists of a cap on Scottish student numbers? Mary, if I could come to you first.

Mary Senior: There is a lot in that question. It is a great regret that the number of EU students coming to Scotland is declining, and there is a whole range of reasons for that, not least Brexit and whether the UK and Scotland will be seen as a welcoming country. I think we can do work to address that point. We think that EU and international students add to the culture, the education, the general vibrancy of learning and the learning environment, so it is something we should encourage. We would be deeply concerned if we move EU students to the level of international tuition fee income and my understanding is that that has not yet been decided.

The sector—and I say that for the trade unions, and I know Matt will speak for himself, and Universities Scotland—wants the money that currently funds EU students to remain in the sector. That is absolutely fundamental. It gives us opportunities to properly fund teaching of Scottish-domiciled potentially, but it also gives us the opportunity to look at how we might attract EU students with bursaries and so on.

Q42 Wendy Chamberlain: You tripped into the second bit that I was going to ask, so I will stay there. It sounds like you are agreeing that there should be more scholarships and bursaries made available for studying at Scottish universities. The information I have is that from next year universities can charge EU students international student fees and that the Scottish Government have committed to that money staying in the sector. I am interested in your current thoughts or position or understanding of Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, where I think there is still a lack of clarity.

Mary Senior: I agree, there is a total lack of clarity. I think Brexit is a total disaster for the university sector. Education doesn't have boundaries. We are stronger because we create links with overseas institutions and staff and students from overseas come to study in Scotland. Scotland does incredibly well with EU and international



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students. We get a higher proportion than England does. Things like the hostile environment and the draconian immigration system all impact on that. It was very welcome last year that the UK Government agreed to reintroduce the post-study work visa. Scotland piloted and started that and it is a real success.

While there are mechanisms for people to get the right to remain and all that, I do not think it is ideal. We have had members for 30 years—a member who worked at the University of Dundee, but because that person is German they were made to feel like an outcast. It was just shocking. Why should somebody who has happily lived in Scotland for that amount of time have to start going through more bureaucratic and expensive processes to live and work here?

There are real concerns to us that the points-based immigration system or the new system post Brexit is not going to be suitable for the university sector, particularly for early careers staff who may be on precarious contracts, they are not earning sufficient amounts of money, they may have family, they are trying to get accommodation and so on. To have to also pay deposits and visas and so on is deeply troubling and I think our education system, and economy and society generally, is going to lose out.

The latest stuff around the fact that we are preparing for a no deal really raises loads of questions about what is going to happen with all the Erasmus exchange programmes for funding—programmes that universities absolutely depended upon and are used incredibly well in Scotland. I think the sector is absolutely united in—

Q43 Wendy Chamberlain: I think it is interesting. We have highlighted the additional research funding that is coming to universities, but people from all over the world work in our universities and potentially are going to be delivering some of that research. In my own visits to the university prior to lockdown I met with staff members who were EU citizens and were making applications. Thank you very much for that.

Matt, can I turn both questions over to you—the impact of tuition fees on EU students and what that means for Scottish students, and your thoughts about scholarship and bursaries?

Matt Crilly: We were really disappointed and sad to see that European Union students are now likely to face tuition fees, perhaps similar to the levels that other international students have been facing. We think there should be public investment in our institutions and we cannot keep relying on more and more fees for student debt essentially to fund our institutions. It is a major loss.

Students really benefit from the Erasmus programme. They have an opportunity to go abroad and study, and students from across Europe are able to come here. I have seen people who have benefited enormously through that. Some of the worries we have are that if the decision is



taken that we should not be a part of Erasmus, replacement programmes will not necessarily come with the same benefits that the Erasmus programme has. As part of Erasmus, if you are a student going on an exchange, you get access to bursary support. You are financially supported and encouraged to go and study abroad. I would be really worried about any kind of replacement scheme not necessarily giving that same financial support for students to do it.

You might see the picture of students from more deprived backgrounds not being able to take up those international opportunities. It will basically be exclusively students from wealthier backgrounds who are able to take up the opportunities. There is a reality that if it is left to individual institutions to form international partnerships, some of our older, wealthier universities might be able to form those partnerships more easily than our post-1992 universities. There are structural inequities that might occur once we lose a scheme like Erasmus that students have really benefited from. A major element of Horizon 2020 is collaboration. We see PhD students benefiting from that collaboration and again it is making sure that we are not losing that.

It is sad to see more fees for students and it would be an enormous shame if we saw fewer international students here. Throughout my time as a student I have lived with students from across Europe who came to Scotland to study. I have enjoyed many social occasions with the students who have come from across Europe and across the world to study in Scotland and benefited from major cultural exchange. We see everything from free language classes, students teaching each other languages, and a wealth of experience would be lost if we do not seriously look at taking part in these schemes. It is a real shame.

Wendy Chamberlain: You have kind of answered my final question, which was about the cultural aspect. You described the social bit, but you went on to describe the cultural bit as well. I have developed my understanding of Erasmus this year and did not previously appreciate how much it impacts on foreign language teaching here in Scotland. We have quite a fragile pipeline and Erasmus is critical to that, so I certainly hope that we get some clarity on that soon. Thank you both very much.

Q44 **Jon Cruddas:** Apologies, everyone. I got caught up on the minutiae of European scrutiny. Apologies if you have talked about this before, but my question follows directly from Wendy's about international students. It has been reported that the influx of fee-paying international students has given a financial lifeline—projected cuts of £200 million rather than £500 million. To what extent will this be the case for all 19 universities, or will it disproportionately affect Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen in helping to give a bit more headroom to some universities rather than others? What are the implications for the sector in general? I noticed a quote that said, "A funding model that relies on commercial income, student residences' rents and international student tuition fees to cross-subsidise core teaching is inherently problematic". That was from Mary,



so I will invite you to have first dibs at this, Mary, on the effect of international students, not just European students.

Mary Senior: You said you were looking at the Audit Scotland report from last year. What is interesting is that that report showed the precarity of the funding system in Scotland. It showed that some universities were doing well—indeed, three of the four ancients. It said most of the reserves are with Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews and the post-1992s were particularly exposed because of their reliance on Scottish Government money and then the fact, as we discussed already, that that level of funding does not meet the full cost of what they are delivering.

Then Covid came along. It is really bizarre in the first instance that it was St Andrews that was looking at losing such a high level of funding and Edinburgh that was so concerned, because their annual turnover was so dependent upon international student tuition fee income. It sort of turned the system on its head. We were having meetings in May with all our reps, and it was the ones from the ancients that were incredibly worried and those in the post-1992s less so. I think the situation now is that it is not as bad as was predicted. You are right that everybody—and I mean even UCU—was predicting tremendous losses, the worst one being £651 million from the sector, and I do not think we are in that situation. But I also think it is still a bit too early to know, because there is so much reliance upon when they come, some coming in January. Some international students who have enrolled now are still sitting in Shanghai, Singapore, or wherever it is, and learning remotely.

There is still an incredible amount of uncertainty. It really is a difficult picture. The post-1992s are not out of the woods, because they still have so many financial challenges. That Audit Scotland report had 10 Scottish universities in deficit in 2017-18 and potentially we are going to be in a worse situation for the next year. I think we will be lucky if there is an institution not in deficit. We made much of Edinburgh University's reserves. It seemed bizarre that they offered a voluntary severance scheme and were contemplating cuts and all the concerns we had about the number of fixed-term contracts and casual contracts and whether would they be extended. But their reserves, which I think are—I always get this wrong—£200 million, are so tied up in assets and how you can realise those assets has been a real problem. Is that answering all your question or was there another part to it?

Q45 **Jon Cruddas:** That is fine. I was asking about the disproportionate effect on different parts of the sector. Matt, do you want to come in on that?

Matt Crilly: Mary has touched very well on the disproportionate parts of the sector and who is more reliant on fees. I think it is important to note that we should be striving to make sure that our country is welcoming of international students. There are a number of different things that you do not necessarily think about. International students are having to pay up to £2,000 for a visa to come and study here. Something that I think is



particularly striking, given the fact we are going through a global health pandemic, is the NHS surcharge going up from £300 to £470 for international students. Things like that make the country a lot less welcoming to international students, who this year in particular are struggling with some elements of the pandemic. Like I said previously, some international students are paying £20,000 a year. They have been treated like customers and they are demonstrating consumer habits now where they feel like they are not necessarily getting their money's worth because they are not getting the full experience that they have been promised. International students are particularly aggrieved this year and essentially are not getting the experience that they were promised.

Q46 **Jon Cruddas:** I was going to ask about the cultural significance of the international students, but you have touched on that already. Excuse me if this has been addressed before, but given the precarious nature of the financial model and the significance of international students within it, are there any measures that the UK and Scottish Governments could take in the short term to protect staff from a potential rollback of services, should this source of income be less than envisaged at present? It is a bit of a moving target. What contingency arrangements would you like to see in place to mitigate against the worst effects that could be coming down the road?

Mary Senior: I was going to talk about furlough because I think this is relevant to mitigate against international tuition fee income, but it is particularly important for staff working in residences. I do not think we want students, whether they are international or Scottish or UK, to be tied to residences. Clearly it has been a challenging year and we have discussed all of that, but a real concern is that universities depend also on the money from student accommodation. There is a lot of staff supporting that, so a continuation of the furlough scheme or funding to underwrite those staff.

The other area that has also been a concern is that so many staff in universities are on fixed-term contracts. The furlough scheme could be used to a certain extent, but if your fixed-term contract was coming to an end in April and the jobs market was the way that it was—you had no chance of getting another fixed-term contract, as you normally would or you would hope to—the Treasury did not allow, or give assurances, staff whose fixed-term contracts were coming to an end to be supplemented by furlough. It could have at least tided them over for a period until things picked up and got back to normal.

Government could do a lot to provide money to help universities deliver the core services that are so fundamental, like the teaching and research. I cannot remember, Mr Cruddas, if you were here when I was talking about the fact that we have 130 jobs at risk at Heriot-Watt University right now. We have Napier University that was threatening jobs in the summer. There is uncertainty in other places. While we do not yet have HR1 notices declaring that there are redundancies forthcoming in other



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places in the same way, there is still a significant amount of uncertainty there. It seems wrong that the sector that should be supporting people to get the skills and education to get back into the workplace is itself putting people on the dole.

Q47 Jon Cruddas: Thanks for that. You make the point about how the furlough programme, as currently constructed, is not agile enough to capture some of the precarious employment across the sector that has been developing for many years and the precarious funding models play into that as well, so thanks for that. That is me done, Chair, unless Matt wants to come back on this.

Matt Crilly: Perhaps just a two-second thing. I think it would be helpful here, given the kind of devolution setup of our country, for the UK Government to make funding available that comes with Barnett consequentialso we can see more investment in institutions and are not losing critical staff who are delivering the teaching and the support to students.

Q48 Chair: One thing I am surprised that neither of you have mentioned—and you could help me out a little bit—is a post-study work offering for international students. This Committee has recommended twice that a post-study work scheme should be part of the offer made to international students who are thinking of coming to the United Kingdom. Of course we have some of the issues around Edinburgh University, which is now able to do it, but it has not been rolled out right across Scotland. Do you have any particular views on it? It is something that this Committee has looked at on several occasions, recognising the competition there is now for international students, particularly in the anglophone world. They have options in Canada, Australia, obviously down in England and a variety of places across Europe. What are your views? Do you think that is a good thing that might help to encourage a bit more travel from international students?

Matt Crilly: Yes, the introduction of the post-study work visa is incredibly welcomed by NUS and student unions in universities across Scotland. I think it is a great initiative. Some of the things we are worried about are the salary thresholds that come with some of this stuff, making sure that the students can stay on and they are able to take up opportunities in the local community, and that within the universities you have things like PhD opportunities open to students and graduate level employment. But we definitely welcome the post-study work visa, and I think it is vital. I know many international students who had forged a life here. They have made their life in the university, they had made their best friends here or they had fallen in love here and then they had to leave once their course was finished. The introduction of the post-study work visa was a really great initiative, and thanks to this Committee for helping drive that.

Chair: I think it was only Jon Cruddas and me who were around in the days of the Fresh Talent initiative. That was in the early days of the



Scottish Parliament. It is good to see that back and established again.

Q49 Deidre Brock: You touched on the virtual learning changes that had to be brought into place very quickly across the universities. I have a daughter at university at the moment, so I am aware of some of these safeguards, but can you tell us a little bit about some of the other things that were put in place to help to prevent the spread of the virus among students? Give us some of the on-the-ground changes that you have seen take place.

Mary Senior: From our union's perspective, we have been arguing that everything possible that could be done virtually and remotely should be done that way. That would include student support. I know lots of the extracurricular freshers activities were also able to be done virtually. The Scottish Government consulted widely with the sector on a suite of guidance for universities and colleges for safe operating or safer operating. We still have a lot of questions about whether it is truly safe with the two-metre distancing. There are so many bottlenecks in university premises: corridors, stairwells, most tutorial rooms that have just one door and lecture theatres. We have advised that where things have to be done on campus, they should be using the largest space possible and it should be well ventilated, and that is creating challenges as we move into the Scottish winter. My health and safety reps are saying natural ventilation, crank up the heating and put on your coat. I am not sure that is that practical, to be frank. I suppose that is why as much as possible should be done virtually where it can.

One of the other areas where there was some tension was the fact that at one point rules in hospitality and shops were different to elsewhere. We had the one metre-plus and two metres for campus. I am sure you have been in some universities and seen that café areas blend into study areas and corridors. We were really concerned about any reduction of the two-metre rule. That was a real worry. I don't think we have the ideal situation and a lot of people feel unsafe.

I also worry that we have not thought enough about long Covid for young people, which I think has been dismissed—"The virus has the biggest impact on older people or BAME communities, disabled people," and so on—and I worry about young people. The other area that has been a big concern is testing and the slow capacity of testing. It is fair to say the employers asked for more testing. We all asked for people arriving internationally, students or staff, to be tested and for systematic testing—we know that it is not just one test; it is one test and another test a few days later—and that did not happen. I think testing has been problematic, and while we welcome the fact that there are more accessible testing centres near university campuses, it was slow.

When we were having a massive outbreak in Glasgow, students had to walk from Maryhill to Cowcaddens and if you were unwell or whatever, it was not ideal. Getting a more effective test and protect system—



Q50 **Deidre Brock:** Has been important, yes. And you, Matt?

Matt Crilly: There is quite a lot to unpack there. I am going to pick up first Mary's point about the assumption that if students get the virus they will be okay. Most of them tend to be young. I think Mary's point is bang on the money. We do not know the long-term implications of the virus and I already know students who are suffering long Covid. Some students do have pre-existing health conditions. Not all students are young. I hope that we will not continue with that public narrative that it is okay if students are contracting the virus.

In terms of the preparations made, I think the Scottish Government have done a good job in consulting the sector. They definitely were taking our points on board. Perhaps where we were a little bit disappointed was the now well-documented last-minute change in the guidance when it shifted from online learning as the default to blended learning. Again, it comes back to structural issues in our sector and the drive to get students on campus when that did not necessarily need to take place.

The point around testing that Mary has raised is important too. The asymptomatic testing of students has proven to be quite successful in some places like Northumbria, where they had an outbreak. It proved to be successful there and I think that is a solution. In terms of the provisions that were put in place, clearly we need to look at what has happened because we have seen really alarming numbers of cases in student halls, where they have been encouraged to make themselves available for blended learning and in-person teaching. Some of it is quite worrying. Some institutions I think took quite a sensible approach. They operated at different capacities and reduced their capacity in the halls to try to help to curb the virus, but some operated at full capacity. Again, looking at that situation, it is a little bit alarming.

We found ourselves at the centre of this pandemic and students did not really know this was what they were signing up for. Obviously they arrived, the virus began spreading like wildfire in these halls and then additional lockdown asks were put on students to not socialise. It was not just not going to the pubs, it was not being allowed to socialise and to stay inside. It was quite alarming. Clearly institutions were not necessarily ready to deal with the mass outbreaks on campus, so we saw some students going without the very practical support that they needed. They went without access to food and drink in some cases and other support services were not necessarily available.

Thankfully, as time went on institutions got their acts together a little bit and that support began to be made available, but there are still some issues with that, particularly in private student accommodation, where students perhaps are outside the orbit of their university a little more and they are struggling to get some of that very practical support. We do need to look back at what happened. By all accounts, the teaching seems to be perhaps safe, but the very fact that students are being encouraged on to campus I think is helping to drive the spread.



Students in Scotland are fortunate enough to be able to give notice in their student accommodation. If they feel that this really isn't for them and they do not want to stay in student halls and it is too much, they can give notice and return home. I think it was really good that the Scottish Government again have made those interventions to make that possible. However, if you are a student and you are told you still need to be here for your classes, you still have to attend your in-person classes, you do not necessarily have a free choice there.

Chair: Thanks, Matt. I am just conscious that we are trying to get as much as we can out of the both of you, but if you can try to be a little bit more concise in some of the responses.

Q51 **Deidre Brock:** Sure. It was about the feedback that you got from students on blended learning versus completely virtual. Also, Mary, have you started collating any information, if that is possible yet, on those long-term impacts, the long Covid effect on students? Are you able to form any impressions yet of how widespread that is? Matt first in terms of the feedback.

Matt Crilly: Like anything, it was perhaps mixed feedback, but there is an understanding that we are dealing with a global health pandemic, so we are all having to make some degree of sacrifice. In an ideal world for students we would be in the classrooms, enjoying the in-person interactions, but we recognise that for the safety of everybody the online teaching is necessary. In some cases it has been really good. Many students have enjoyed it. A lot of the evidence just now is anecdotal though, so I would be reluctant to say we should make longer-term decisions based on what is quite fresh anecdotal evidence.

For some it has been easier to engage. For some students who were perhaps less confident it felt more daunting in an in-person 50-person classroom to speak out, but on a Zoom call it feels a little bit easier. Some students have struggled too. In some places we have seen not necessarily live in-person online meetings; they have instead had prerecorded stuff and online forums and sometimes they have lacked that real interactive element. There has been a bit of a mixture and I suspect that we will continue to learn from this going forward.

Mary Senior: This probably is also related to digital poverty and digital inclusion. Obviously last November, when free broadband across the UK was being spoken of, a lot of people thought that was an absolutely absurd idea, but I do think that this global pandemic has made digital inclusion so key to what we do. I hope that the Committee might consider that.

Are we collating? We are not collating information around long Covid. Health professionals probably need to do that, but what the union has been collating is a dashboard of outbreaks on campus. That is on our website, so I could share that with your Clerks after to get a sense of where our reps have reported it, if it has not been reported already.



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Deidre Brock: That would be really helpful, thank you.

Matt Crilly: Could I just come in very briefly on the digital poverty point? Mary has touched on a really important topic here. We do need to make sure that all students can access online learning. The very first message I received as a student rep when the university went online was from a student parent who did not have access to laptops and the internet at home. Many of our widening access and mature students did not have access to that equipment. I think that is an important point, and I am glad Mary raised it.

Chair: Yes, am I glad we got on to that. We will now go across to Mhairi Black.

Q52 **Mhairi Black:** Thank you for joining us today. It has been good listening to you so far. I am really getting informed here.

What I want to pick at a little bit more is trying to understand what the logic would be behind the complaint that has already been raised by UCU and has been mentioned in this meeting, that the measures do not go far enough in stating that remote and online learning should be the default unless it is not possible. Mary, you might be best placed to answer this. What do you think has driven that reluctance to change that?

Mary Senior: Matt referred to the change in the guidance. The versions that we saw at the end of August had the fact that if you could work remotely and if you could do the activity, that should be the case. Because that was the case for the rest of the economy in Scotland, we welcomed that. Then when it changed when it was published, it gave universities the scope to force people back on to campus when they did not feel safe. I think that is the bottom line.

I do have members, particularly in Edinburgh, St Andrews, Strathclyde and Dundee, those particular hotspots for us, where staff who feel frightened and anxious are being asked to be on campus. They are not feeling safe and in some places there is a concern that they have risk-assessed a building or a room but they have not risk-assessed an activity and that risk assessments have not factored in the large numbers of people that are going to be moving around. Is it enough for a student to clean the desk? Are we happy that that workspace is cleaned and Covid-free for the next person to come in? That is the reality that we are facing now.

In some places, understanding line managers have been able to work flexibly around that. I think you are going to get a better experience where people are happy to do what they are doing. If people are fearful delivering a tutorial or a lecture, I don't think it is going to be ideal. That is recognised. It is just that there is not that flexibility across the piece.

Q53 **Mhairi Black:** Have there been instances in your knowledge where universities are pushing for people to come back physically into the university when they are not comfortable? If so, why? What benefit is it



to the university to have more bodies piling in when it has not effectively done risk assessments yet?

Mary Senior: I did not say they had not done risk assessments, I am saying it is questionable whether our members feel reassured about risk assessments. As I said, our members in a number of institutions feel they are being coerced to come back and they are unhappy. We have raised those with the employer, particularly at the University of Edinburgh and the University of St Andrews.

Mhairi Black: Excellent, thanks. Matt, do you have anything to add?

Matt Crilly: Yes. I would just reiterate perhaps what we have said. A lot of this comes back to the structural funding problems in education. Institutions are reliant on international student fees. We started this conversation by talking about the fear that international students are not arriving. There was a structural problem and our institutions felt that they had to deliver in-person teaching and make students come back and encourage students to come back to make sure that international students arrived, that fee-paying students arrived so that income was not lost. That is how many students feel right now. They feel like that has been the case and that in some cases their institution did not communicate perhaps precisely what their education would look like because there was a desire to get people back and to make sure particularly that fee-paying students arrived.

Some of it definitely is about education as well. Some courses are difficult to teach online and again we should be looking at those practical-based, lab-based courses in our universities and our colleges as well where there is a lot of practical-based learning to make sure that if something really has to take place it can be done safely. A lot of this and the change of guidance and the encouraging students back comes down to the structural funding issues in the sector.

Q54 **Mhairi Black:** Excellent. That is helpful, Matt. Following on from that, if there is this fear from universities that unless there is the physical opportunity to teach, there will not be any demand from the international community or international students, what would the structural change be then? Is it as simple as, whatever the amount of money that is raised by international students is, let the Government invest that so that there is not this reliance on the international community? Is that essentially what the real answer to all this is?

Mary Senior: I said before to look at public spending on tertiary education. In the UK the latest figures are that we spend 0.47% of GDP on tertiary education. Germany spends over twice that, so does France. Norway spends more than three times the amount that the UK spends. I think it is a wider question around taxation as well. I hope this pandemic has also encouraged questions that look at taxes not as something to be avoided or evaded, but as something that supports the structure and the fabric of our society. The fact that corporation taxes in the UK are at



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19%, whereas in Germany they are nearly 30%, there is not that contribution there for the whole good of society, the economy and everyone else. It is about more money and how we get that into the system, both in Scotland and across the UK.

Mhairi Black: Excellent, thanks. Matt, do you have anything to add?

Matt Crilly: I definitely agree with Mary there. I think that this is public investment and we should not be relying on a marketised system of exorbitant tuition fees from international students. I don't think it is inevitable. In Scotland we have made the conscious decision for our Scottish undergraduate students that we think education is a public right. We think it benefits society as a whole to have an educated population where, no matter your background, you get access to higher education. It comes as part of that. I think we should be extending that further and being outwardly progressive and not necessarily charging people who are not from Scotland £20,000 a year to study here. It should be backed up by strong public investment to make sure that we have strong institutions and that students are able to enjoy that learning without necessarily leaving saddled with debt.

Q55 **Sally-Ann Hart:** Good afternoon, Mary and Matt. I was going to ask some questions about mental health issues in universities, but obviously focusing on Scottish universities. I know that mental illness is one of the major health challenges in Scotland and that the number of university students in Scotland seeking support for mental health issues has increased by about two-thirds over a five-year period up to 2018. We do not have up-to-date data. I understand that last year the Scottish Government pledged specific funding for mental health support for students in colleges and universities.

My first question to both of you is, to what extent are universities equipped, financially and in practical terms, to provide support for students suffering poor mental health, both in general and as a result of the coronavirus pandemic? Perhaps Matt could answer that question first.

Matt Crilly: It is an important question and I am glad you raised it. It is a major worry just now. As you said, student mental health, as publicly reported, does tend to be worse than the rest of the adult population and students tend to suffer poor mental health at higher rates. The Scottish Government have made funding available to try to increase the mental health provision within our institutions, and that is welcome, but it is true that the mental health waiting times at our universities were long pre-Covid. They were already too long. You can see students waiting for months for an appointment to see a mental health specialist. Again, it will vary from institution to institution. It will vary as to the time of the year that a student goes to see the service.

The big worry just now is the impact of Covid on student mental health. If you are a student who has been asked to self-isolate in a tiny little bedroom in a student hall, you are away from your support networks,



your family and your friends who you know and love, and you are in this totally new environment, many students are feeling isolated. We have also seen students going through repeat self-isolation compared to some of the rest of the population. If you are an international student, for example, you may have had to quarantine upon arrival and then we had the additional ask on students to stay indoors in Scotland. If you have then come into contact with someone who has Covid, you have to self-isolate again. It is repeat self-isolation for students and we are really worried about them, particularly those who live in student halls.

The Government have made more funding available for the mental health support services in Scotland, and we welcome it, but there does need to be more investment here. We think there is a real duty on our institutions just now to be reaching out to students proactively as well; if they know they have hundreds of students self-isolating in accommodation in this really fragile environment that they are proactively phoning them, checking in on them and making sure they are doing okay. Some institutions are doing that, some are not, and again the question for me is around some of the private student accommodation where those students perhaps fall through the cracks a little bit more in the proactive support.

Mary Senior: I agree with everything that Matt said and the NUS position on that. Again, thank you for asking these questions, because I think it is so vital. We just worry that while the 80 new counsellors and the funding is incredibly welcome, is it enough at this time? Matt has described the challenges that students are facing.

Staff mental health is also a concern. We have spoken a bit about the increasing workloads and the job insecurity issues. With that in the mix, it is incredibly challenging. Certainly a priority on student mental health and getting that right first has to be key.

Q56 Sally-Ann Hart: Thank you. Matt, I wondered how you were monitoring the wellbeing of students during the coronavirus. It is obviously a very challenging time. How is the National Union of Students monitoring students for mental health?

Matt Crilly: At the moment we tend to hear from students who are struggling and they mention the fact that they have had to wait so long for their mental health support appointment at their university and suchlike. What we are doing at the moment is we are asking institutions to try to monitor it. We have been making representations to the Government, to universities and to accommodation providers in particular to do that proactive scoping, to proactively be contacting students.

One of the things that we are worried about now is those students who have arrived in halls might be 17 or 18 years old and be really young and might not actively make themselves known to the support services of the university. We think it is important that the institutions are proactively monitoring students and phoning around and doing the spot checks that



they can do to ensure their welfare, not necessarily just relying on what might be an 18-year-old who lacks confidence to come forward and make themselves available.

Q57 Sally-Ann Hart: Matt, when we have looked at coronavirus during the lockdown all over the country, community groups were pulling together to look out for and help each other. Do students have self-help groups perhaps and keep an eye on new students or people who, as you say, lack confidence to come forward? Are there self-help groups that people are setting up?

Matt Crilly: Yes, that has been one of the more positive elements of the pandemic, seeing the community rally around. We have seen students out delivering food parcels or support packages to fellow students who are self-isolating or just staying in student halls. Student unions across the country have been doing all they can to do that.

Crucial in that as well is that a lot of the social and community opportunities that students usually get at university—okay, it is very different, but a lot of the clubs and societies and things that students usually enjoy are still operating, but are operating on an online basis to try to again provide some sort of social opportunities for people to make friends and meet people on their courses and things like that. It is also the reality too that student unions do tend to be relatively poorly funded and do not have many staff members. It tends to be small teams, but there has been a lot of coming together.

Very early on in my previous role at University of Strathclyde, we teamed up with Refuweege, a local charity that usually provides support to refugees in Glasgow. We teamed up so that a lot of students were volunteering and helping deliver food packages to refugees, but if a student had to self-isolate, they could get access to that very practical food support and someone would be there immediately. There have been a lot of good initiatives, but hopefully we have some more institutional support as well.

Q58 Sally-Ann Hart: Thank you, that is good to know. Mary, I am just wondering about the change in teaching methods, which has obviously put a lot of additional workload pressure on teaching and administrative staff in the universities. What extra resources are available to university staff to access mental health support for them or just extra resources to support a change in teaching methods?

Mary Senior: That is an incredibly good question. I was going to supplement the response that Matt gave to say that we, as a union, have been offering wellbeing webinars and supporting people through the pandemic with advice around homeworking and delivering remote learning. It happened so rapidly and universities are dealing with so many other issues, so any support that is out there has been incredibly patchy. As a union, we have stepped in all too often in that regard.



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Sally-Ann Hart: Thank you. That is my questions.

Chair: I am just looking around at all my colleagues. Does anybody else feel that they need to ask a last pressing question? Alberto, did you have anything that you wanted to raise or is everybody quite happy?

Alberto Costa: Thank you, Chairman. No, I am quite satisfied with all the questions.

Chair: Thank you for that. There are no more questions, as you can hear. Thank you both. That was a fascinating session. Thank you for giving us a sense of what the experience is like for the students and the staff teams in our universities and colleges just now. I know it is a very strange and challenging time. Looking at my colleagues, I think most of us are products of higher education, so we do know what it was like when we were students. Certainly this will be a year that no one will ever forget. I thank you and congratulate you for the way you have risen to the very demanding challenges that you have had to experience as you go back in this academic year.

There are a couple of things that our Clerks might get in touch with you about, some further bits of working evidence that you may supply us. If there is anything else that you feel you could usefully contribute to this inquiry, please get in touch and we look forward to hearing from you.