



# The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

**University APPG meeting: Higher Education in the Devolved Nations**  
**08:30-10:00, Wednesday 9 May, Terrace Dining Room B, House of Commons**

Chair:

- Lord Norton of Louth, Co-Chair of the APPUG

Speakers:

- Professor Elizabeth Treasure, Vice-Chancellor, Aberystwyth University
- Professor Gerry McCormac, Vice-Chancellor, University of Stirling
- Professor Paddy Nixon, Vice-Chancellor, Ulster University

## Summary

**Professor Elizabeth Treasure** opened her remarks by describing the higher education sector in Wales as diverse and strong, outlining the differences in institutions. She explained that universities played a huge economic role in Wales, especially in terms of creating jobs in areas that had few employers outside of the public sector. She then turned to the challenges faced by the higher education sector in Wales.

The simultaneous divergence and interconnectedness of higher education across the UK posed a big challenge, she thought, explaining that as the systems diverged there was a need to celebrate difference whilst still maintaining the UK's brand of excellence.

Decisions made about higher education in England impacted the other three nations she stressed, giving the figure that 40% of students in Wales came from England. In terms of recent legislative changes, she hoped that the memorandum of understanding between the nations will be enacted as promised during the legislation.

Turning to political events, she spoke about the need for EU funds to be replaced by the government post-Brexit; this was particularly the case in rural areas such as Ceredigion and Aberystwyth.

Professor Treasure urged the Post-18 Education and Funding Review currently being conducted in England to look at the Diamond Review that had recently concluded in Wales. She explained the Diamond Review recommended the introduction of a progressive student support system, with support for students across all forms of learning including part-time. Targeted support for those most in need whilst retaining the principal of universality was the basis of Diamond's recommendations.

In terms of devolution, she told attendees that Aberystwyth University was working with the growth deals that had been announced across the country given that universities were key economic drivers in their localities. It was at the core of her institution's being that the university should help to develop life culturally and economically whilst also being there for its local community.

**Professor Gerry McCormac** opened by stating that the diversification of higher education across the UK was "particularly unhelpful".

He gave a range of important statistics about the Scottish higher education sector, explaining that institutions within the nation had turnovers ranging from £20 million to £850 million. Institutions supported 150,000 jobs and contributed £7.5 billion to the Scottish economy he added, before stating that of the 250,000 students educated in Scotland, 75% were undertaking undergraduate study and 25% postgraduate study. Of the student body, two thirds were Scottish, 12% were from the rest of the UK, 13% were non-EU international students and 9% were EU students.

Given that tuition was free for Scottish students and those from the EU, Scottish universities were increasingly looking to international recruitment to subsidise the cost of educating home-domiciled students. In terms of research, Scotland had 6 universities in the top 50 according to the results of the last Research Excellence Framework (REF); Scottish universities also received £300 million for quality-related research (QR) funding. Professor McCormac explained that as Scotland received 14.7% of overall research funding in the UK, it punched slightly above its weight and therefore it was important that structural changes did not impact negatively on the opportunity for Scotland to continue to receive this level of funding.

Widening access and participation was a big priority of the Scottish Government he said, giving First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's target that by 2030 20% of those entering higher education will be from the 20% most deprived backgrounds.

In contrast to the situation in England, applications to Scottish universities from EU students had decreased since the Brexit vote; any changes to the system in England impacted upon the devolved nations in unpredictable ways. Given that the Scottish Funding Council would no longer have to pay the fees of the 9% of its student body that was from the EU post-Brexit, there was a big push in the sector to retain this funding within higher education.

In terms of immigration, he referred to the 'Fresh Talent' initiative introduced by former first minister Lord McConnell which gave Scotland a competitive advantage by offering a better post-study work option for international students.

On a final, UK-wide matter, Professor McCormac spoke about the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and the fact that Scotland already had the Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR).

**Professor Paddy Nixon** gave an introduction to Ulster University, and explained the higher education system in Northern Ireland. He explained that Ulster's student body was drawn equally from the five socio-economic quintiles and was therefore a relatively equitable reflection of Northern Irish society.

The erosion of funding was a major problem in Northern Ireland he explained, particularly as this affected institutions' ability to support widening access. He believed one of the key roles of universities was to increase social mobility and enhance the capacity of individuals; the funding system could either challenge or benefit this aim.

Explaining the current funding system, which operated a mixed model reflecting the private and public good of universities, he told attendees that funding stood at £7,000 per student, with students themselves covering £4,160 of this for the year 2018/19. He stressed that despite the fact student fees had not risen in line with England, Ulster University and Queen's University did very well. There was also no additional funding allocated for Ulster University as a multi-campus university, he added stressing how big the challenge of funding was.

Turning to a challenge that was unique to Northern Ireland, he explained that the lack of an Executive meant one-year budgets and therefore institutions in Northern Ireland did not enjoy the same planning horizon that their counterparts in the other nations did. The cap on student numbers meant that of the 14,035 students in Northern Ireland that entered higher education in 2016/17, only 65.6% stayed in Northern Ireland; fewer than a third returned home after graduation.

In terms of Brexit, Ulster University's Magee campus in Derry~Londonderry is the most westerly campus in the UK, located only 5 kilometres from the Irish border, and therefore arrangements for free movement post-Brexit was a major challenge. Professor Nixon told attendees that approximately 25% of staff at the Magee campus crossed the border every day and therefore questions such as whether or not taxes would be harmonised presented a problem in terms of growing a vibrant workforce.

Staying on an international theme, he lamented the lack of post-study work visa in the UK, especially given that the Republic of Ireland had an appealing system in place for international students. He then praised Universities UK for pushing the government hard on introducing a competitive post-study work offer.

The intention of devolution of higher education was to create a stronger and better engaged sector with more competition, but in reality, it had had the opposite effect he thought, adding that even when the nation had an executive, it was the "fourth cousin" in the UK higher education landscape.

Finally, Professor Nixon told attendees that there were lessons to be learnt from the systems in each of the four nations; the Diamond Review in Wales was an exemplar

for widening participation, the Northern Irish mixed model designed to reflect public and private good was excellent, and there were strong elements to the Scottish system as well. He hoped the Post-18 Education and Funding Review would reflect the best of the whole of the UK and bring higher education across the nations away from divergence whilst promoting collaboration.