

Secretaries' Group

27 February 2025

Agenda

There will be a business meeting as part of the Secretaries' residential from 13:30 to 14:25 on Thursday 27 February. It will be held in-person in the Wallace Monument Room at the Stirling Court Hotel.

Ulrike Peter
SPO (Resources and Governance)

Agenda

Item	Paper/Oral	Subject
01	Minutes	Committee business <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apologies • Approval of meeting minute 13 Dec 24
02	Oral/paper	US update <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. US Future Funding programme (paper) b. SFC Allocations/ Funding clawback c. Tertiary Education and Training Bill d. ONS classification e. Immigration and proposal for Scottish Scheme f. Convictions guidance
03	Paper	Housing Bill - homelessness Progress update and overview of institutions' activities in preventing homelessness of students at risk.
04	Paper	Scottish election manifestoes 2026 Update on policy asks to help influence the development of manifestoes by the major political parties in Scotland ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament Elections.
05		The next meeting is on 23 May 2025 at Strathclyde University
Break for afternoon tea/coffee and cake		



Secretaries' Group

Action note of meeting held in-person from 11:00 to 13:00 on Friday 13 December 2024 at the Open University in Scotland.

Item	Summary/Purpose	Action	Lead
1	<p>Apologies</p> <p>Minutes from business meetings held on 20 September 2024</p> <p>Matters arising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid Inquiry meetings on 14 November: David Duncan and Susan Mitchell reflected on the Covid Inquiry hearing, focussing on the student and university sector experience, and how Scottish Government and the sector can learn from this for the future. The hearing can be viewed online. • US plans for manifesto influencing: US PACT is developing sector manifesto 'asks' ahead of the 2026 Scottish election. The main issue is sector funding. Scottish Labour want policy proposals ready for early 2025. PACT engaging with all US committees. • Accommodation: Housing (Scotland) Bill: US shared an update noting the bills progress having completed Stage 1. Secretaries have been invited to complete a questionnaire on Student homelessness, also to provide a contact to join the existing PBSA group to support US throughout the passage of the Bill. US is engaging with the SG lead official, and will monitor progress on this closely. 	<p>Noted Approved</p> <p>US to update Secretaries' Group at the Residential</p> <p>US to update Secretaries' Group in the new year</p>	<p>LJ</p> <p>UP/LJ</p>
2	<p>Secretaries Convener update</p> <p>The Convener reflected on the draft agenda and planning for the Residential meeting, 27/28 February and invited feedback and suggestions for the programme.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session on Changes to QAA outcomes: In discussion, members expressed concerns around the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Review, noting a shift towards metrics-based responses; and also the relationship between QAA and SFC as well as Sparqs, in particular, the associated workload and increase in planners' importance in informing returns and input in financial statements etc., as well as that of Heads of Teaching in writing TEF returns/producing input/outcome statements. • With St Andrews University going through the tertiary review first, Alastair Merrill suggested approaching the VP for Education to deliver part of this session at the Residential. 	<p>Checking if VP for Education at St Andrews can help deliver the session in combination with a planner</p>	<p>UP/AM</p>
3	<p>Funding discussion</p> <p>Lesley Jackson noted:</p> <p>Circular 17-24 SG Budget Statement:</p>		



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A change to the presentation of the figures made interpretation challenging on the day. In summary: ○ A 3.2% uplift to the capital budget suggests priority is being given to R&I, and a 3.5% increase in total investment in HE; and ○ US held discussions with principals following the announcement to address any questions in advance of discussions with the Minister and SFC at the Tripartite Group. <p>Tripartite Group (SG/SFC/US) meeting on 10 December focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the retention of resource in the SFC budget for the 'SQA places' and SFC's intentions given last year's unhelpful delay of the funding announcement, and the need for early clarity on any changes in funded places; ○ Expected timing of the Letter of Guidance is hoped to be available in early January; ○ US is making the case for stability of the sector and extra funding for estates, and understanding if there is flexibility on Financial Transactions; ○ Skills England: SG had noted a quadrilateral migration policy group to inform migration policy via the MAC – it was agreed that US would want a direct route into the process; and ○ Post 16 reform: SG advised that an announcement on the consultation on public bodies in the post-16 education sector would now be expected in the new year. <p>SFC Allocations Group:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Although members had pressed for early clarity on changes in funded places, it is unlikely concluded prior to the UCAS deadline. ○ Adjustments to conditions of grant to reflect ministerial support for the charging of the new rUK fee were thought to be published in the SFC's final allocation letter in May. As this is too late, SFC are to consider how to respond to the request for an earlier statement. ○ In discussion, Secretaries noted their individual institutions intentions regarding charging of the new rUK fee. <p>Engagement with Anas Sarwar: LJ reflected on the meeting noting that Labour's manifesto intention is to keep HE free.</p>		
4.	<p>Progress of US guidance on convictions and charges</p> <p>UP highlighted the progress in developing the guidance and noted how US had been seeking advice to address feedback to further adjust and shape the guidance in light of it. Key points that will drive revisions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Admissions, the principle of self-incrimination, jurisdictional relevance and ensuring that international students understand the need to make declarations. ○ Members reflected in general on the need for understanding of the sector, supporting a consistent approach while carefully framing the guidance; also on the nature of cases, and specifically the resilience of panel members and relevant training support. 	Draft potentially be available for the Residential meeting	UP



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The final guidance is expected to be delivered by late spring 2025. 		
5	<p>AHUA update on developments from wider staff team Ben Vulliamy, Executive Director, AHUA</p> <p>Since Ben has been in post, the key theme of discussion has been the sector's rapid change in context. Part of the work of the Association is to help provide tools to manage the day-to-day and future thinking. He also noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planning is ongoing for the 2025 Conference held in Swansea; The Association's interest is in strengthening its advocacy work and connections with OfS, UUK etc.; Strengthening institutional governance processes to combat assumptions around governance failure by raising minimum level of compliance, and in 2025 design a model and set out tools to highlight what good governance will look like for the future; Focus will be on the sector to demonstrate its contribution to the economy given the current situation there is little chance of seed funding for shared services etc.; and Defining its membership and reviewing the Association's balance of purpose and focus <p>In discussion, Secretaries reflected and made the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Membership and advocacy: the group emphasised the importance of all voices being heard; AUHA's support for development and agreed it being a good source of advice including its advocacy role with UUK. Industrial Strategy and regional growth: members expressed concerns over implications of devolution and its focus on regionalisation including a possible network of economic development officers working across universities. Shared services: members expressed concerns over a regional approach and the need to ensure that the opportunity for joint approaches is not lost should there be changes made in the rUK 	UUK Blueprint: US is taking a watching brief and continuing to make the case for Scotland.	LJ
6	<p>Presentation: Update on legislative changes to the Disclosure Scotland Act Jillian Cole, Customer Engagement Manager, Disclosure Scotland</p> <p>Secretaries received the presentation 'Get ready for Disclosure Act' which covered what has already changed in The Disclosure (Scotland) Act since it became law in July 2020; what else will change; what stakeholders can do to prepare for the changes; and how they will be supported. Changes will come into place on 1 April 2025. There will be further engagement with stakeholders in late 2025. The slides will be shared with Secretaries following the meeting.</p>	Circulate the presentation slides	UP
7	<p>AOB Update on SFC OF&AM workshop by Caroline Summers</p> <p>Caroline updated Secretaries on discussions and outcomes from the workshops held by SFC in November. A written summary of its</p>		



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	<p>implementation is due in Dec. This should include information on the SEAP statement and a timeline for data points.</p> <p>USECEC leadership update Professor Liz Bacon, Principal, Abertay University has agreed to take on the leadership of USECEC and agreed to host the USECEC Forum at Abertay University in March 2025. US will organise the half-day Forum and circulate further details soon. It would be important to have Secretaries' input. Veronica Strachan agreed to represent the Secretaries Group on USECEC and engage with the Forum.</p> <p>UKVI Audit at Glasgow University David Duncan noted the learnings from the latest immigration compliance audit of its 12,000 international students. It requires the University to make the recommended changes which will be implemented via an action plan and have to be delivered until March '25.</p>	Further details on USECEC Forum to be circulated to Secretaries' Group	UP
8.	<p>The Convener thanked Sheena Stewart for all her work and her invaluable contribution to the Secretaries' Group over the years.</p> <p>The Convener closed the meeting with thanks to everyone.</p> <p>Next meeting Residential Meeting, Thursday 27 – Friday 28 February 2025 at the Stirling Court Hotel.</p>		
9.	<p>Presentation on OUIS office move Secretaries received a presentation from Martin Boyle on the OUIS' future move to new premises.</p>		

Present

Name	Job title	Institution
Ms Caroline Summers	Vice-Principal and University Secretary	Abertay University
Dr Neale Laker	Deputy University Secretary	University of Dundee
Mr David Cloy	Head of Governance & Risk	Edinburgh Napier University
Ms Leigh Chalmers	Vice-Principal Strategic Change and Governance and University Secretary	University of Edinburgh
Dr David Duncan	Chief Operating Officer and University Secretary (Governance)	University of Glasgow
Ms Susan Mitchell	Chief Operating Officer & Deputy Vice-Chancellor	Glasgow Caledonian University
Ms Emma Williams	University Secretary & Registrar	Glasgow School of Art
Ms Eileen Schofield (Convener)	University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer	University of Stirling
Ms Sheena Stewart	University Secretary	University of the Highlands and Islands
Mr Martin Boyle	Depute Director for Strategy, Planning and Resources	Open University in Scotland
Dr Stuart Fancey	University Secretary	University of Strathclyde
Ms Irene Hynd	Vice-Principal and University Secretary	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh



Ms Veronica Strachan	University Secretary and Vice Principal Corporate Services	Robert Gordon University
Prof Vicky Gunn	Academic Registrar and Secretary	Royal Conservatoire of Scotland
Ms Donna McMillan	University Secretary	University of the West of Scotland
Mr Alastair Merrill	Vice-Principal (Governance)	University of St Andrews
Mr Ben Vuliamy	Executive Secretary	Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA)

In attendance

Ms Jillian Cole	Customer Engagement Manager	Disclosure Scotland
Ms Lesley Jackson	Deputy Director (Policy)	Universities Scotland
Ms Ulrike Peter	Senior Policy Officer	Universities Scotland
Ms Heather Sloan	Policy Assistant	Universities Scotland

Apologies

Dr Jim McGeorge	University Secretary and Chief Operating Officer	University of Dundee
Ms Ruth Moir	University Secretary	Heriot-Watt University
Ms Samantha Waters	Interim University Secretary	Aberdeen University
Ms Devon Taylor	Company Secretary	SRUC



Secretaries' Group

27 February 2025

Item 2a: Future Funding

Purpose

1. This paper sets out progress in relation to the development of the future funding programme of activity within Universities Scotland as discussed and agreed by Main Committee.
2. This paper is for information.

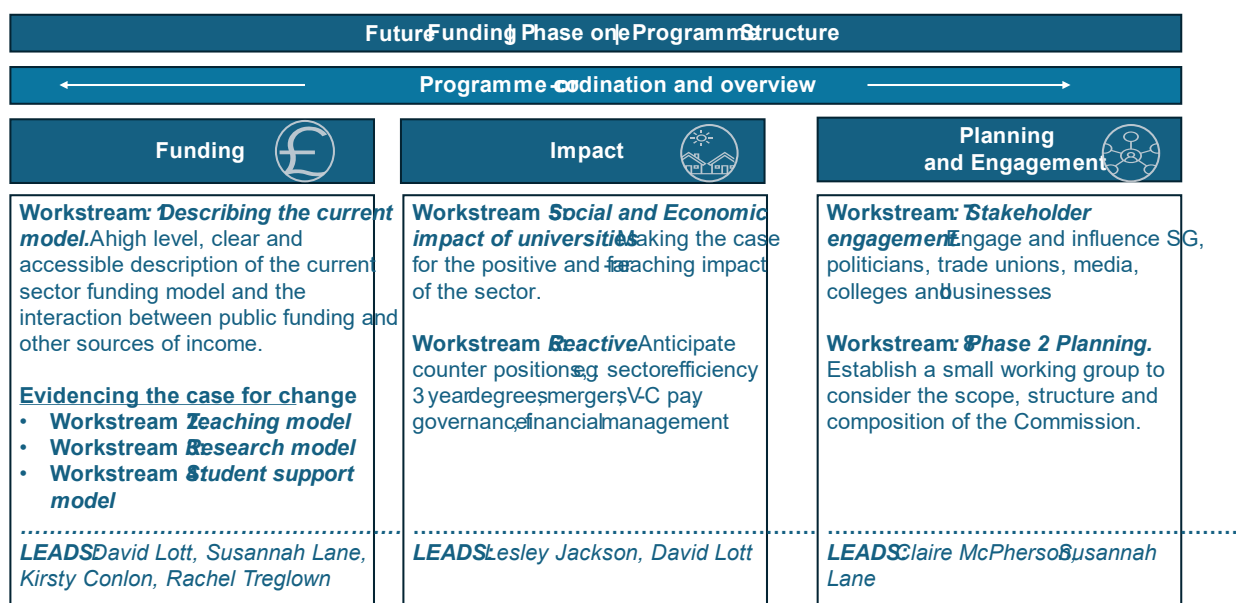
Background

3. At principals Main Committee in October, members discussed a paper which captured the output from our future funding workshop and identified a proposed way forward - a two phased approach to advocate for long term change in the funding model. We shared this with Secretaries at the last meeting in December.
4. Phase one of our approach is focussed on strengthening the evidence base and building the case for change. Phase two will see a sector-initiated Commission for Future Funding, designed to garner cross- party support and represent the interests of the sector, employers, students and wider society. The commission will begin in late Autum 2025 and run over the course of the Scottish Parliament election period, concluding in June 2026.
5. In parallel with work being led by Universities Scotland, the Royal Society of Edinburgh will hold a two-day conference in May 2025 on future funding of tertiary education. The Carnegie Trust for Universities is also developing plans for a citizen jury style model of public engagement on the issue of university funding. We anticipate that work will launch in the second half of 2025. Both of these initiatives are aligned with our objectives.

Progress

6. We have been working to scope out and resource activity for phase one of our future funding work. The focus of phase one is to increase support for change within the system, produce easily accessible and digestible evidence for a range of audiences and plan the scope and shape of the second phase of our work.
7. This table below sets out the programme structure, themes, workstreams and staff resource allocated to the delivery of phase one activity.





8. Members are invited to note the workstreams. Key issues to highlight:

- Phase one activity is not designed to point to future funding solutions, rather the focus is on systematically evidencing the case for change, supported by engagement and advocacy activity.
- A strong element of our advocacy and engagement work will be in strengthening relationships and securing allies to help deliver our key messages.
- Members will have the opportunity to engage with material as it is developed, and we will maximise the use of our committee structure to support broader sector engagement.
- While work is already underway across workstreams, the timing of the publication of material will be a strategic decision to ensure maximum impact, and to complement other planned activity such as the RSE conference in May. Other timing considerations include key dates around the introduction of post-school reform legislation, the timing of which is still to be announced.
- Beyond co-ordinating evidence and setting out the case for change, ensuring we present material in an accessible and engaging way is vital to distinguish this work from our business as usual activity, and to reach a wide range of stakeholders.
- Workstream 6 is not a planned 'output' of the programme, however it is important that we anticipate criticisms or commentary that may emerge and distract from our core messages. The intention is to review and enhance existing lines and rebuttals across a range of issues to ensure we are best prepared for any reactive activity should it be required.

Resourcing

9. There is no more important issue for the sector than securing a sustainable funding model. For that reason, we are prioritising staff time across this first phase of activity. However, in the course of planning we identified a number of areas that either require specialist support/skills or where working in partnership with others could secure additional benefits.



10. In addition, we have identified three opportunities to partner with others to support the aims of this first phase of our work on future funding.
11. We have secured the opportunity to be one of a small number of partners working with Prosper (formerly SCDF) on their policy prospectus. Their 'Blueprint for Action' aims to drive immediate actions by Government to build economic success for Scotland over the next 5 to 10 years and will also underpin their engagement with all political parties as they develop their manifestos for the next Scottish Parliament election in May 2026. Prosper's reach within the business community in Scotland, combined with their ability to capture the attention of politicians of all parties, makes them a hugely attractive partner for us. This partnership will mean that the interests and priorities of higher education – and our case for change – will sit at the heart of an influential economic vision for Scotland being advocated by our business community.
12. In addition, there are two projects being led by UUK where we believe a small amount of additional investment could secure some very helpful Scottish specific content. The first is a piece of public perceptions research being developed as part of the UUK Reputation Strategy. This work will involve in-depth research with the public and key stakeholders to accurately diagnose any underlying perceptions that are driving negative sentiment towards the sector, and where the opportunities lie to enhance it. The research will likely involve a combination of qualitative focus groups with the public (and potentially with university staff) and stakeholder interviews. This will be combined with quantitative polling as well as a comprehensive review of existing evidence. We believe that this will provide valuable insight for our work on future funding, and will also provide us with the opportunity to test the extent to which there is variation in public opinion across the UK.
13. The second UUK project we are interested in exploring from a Scottish perspective is a piece of work being commissioned from KPMG on the costs of teaching. This work originates from the UUK Transformation and Efficiency board. Having had some early discussion with UUK colleagues, we are interested in exploring with KPMG whether there is scope for us to add to the existing specification to secure some relevant Scottish output. We think this will complement and enhance the existing work we have been taking forward through the Funding Policy Group. There is considerable value in a credible and independent third party providing analysis and insight into this issue.
14. Accordingly, principals approved our ask for a ringfenced member contribution to support this activity.

Conclusion

15. Members are invited to:
 - note the approach being taken to phase one of the work on future funding

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Secretaries' Group

27 February 2025

Item 3: Housing Bill - Homelessness

Purpose

1. This paper provides an overview of the evidence provided by members to our questionnaire allowing us to capture universities' activities that address accommodation pressures and support vulnerable students at risk of homelessness. This is to help us develop a brief on homelessness we can use in our advocacy should amendments to the Housing Bill extend its scope to include higher education.
2. This paper is for information.

Current situation

3. The Housing Bill has concluded stage 1 and has moved to stage 2 (amendments) at the end of January and is to be concluded by 29 May. As it stands, neither university-owned accommodation or PBSA is named as being within scope of the Bill (but neither is it specified as out of scope). However, there continues to be the possibility of the sector being included through opposition amendment.
4. We understand that there is discussion about amendments which might centre on setting a timescale for the creation of model T&Cs; affordability; and on further consultation on (unspecified) regulation of the sector. We have offered advice on all aspects including the 28-day notice period to SG officials and the Minister directly picking up on work taken forward that are or have the potential to address these as an outcome of the PBSA Review and do not require a statutory duty.
5. US has been working with SG officials within the policy and Bill's team who, to date, have noted the following:
 - a. SG will not seek an amendment to include universities in the homeless 'ask and act' duty;
 - b. While the list of relevant organisations does not include F/HE, the Bill includes provision for this list to be reviewed at a future date, allowing time to properly consult institutions;
 - c. The only addition to the organisations that the Parliament's Social Justice Committee, which is considering the Bill, wants to see is Social Security Scotland;
 - d. SG are not aware of any likely other amendment, whilst noting that the Chartered Institute of Scotland has spoken to the idea of including F/HE and some third sector bodies (Rock Trust, A Way Home Scotland) have spoken to the value of considering inclusion of the 'education sector'.

Overview of institutions' activities in preventing homelessness

6. We received 15 institutional responses to our questionnaire on actions on the prevention of student homelessness. This covered questions on pressure and demand for student accommodation, but also measures of support institutions have in place like offering guarantees, year-round and emergency accommodation and strategic approaches to addressing housing issues.
7. Firstly, HEIs confirmed demand on student accommodation has decreased, relieving pressure on housing and only in 22/23 did around half of respondents see demand exceeding supply. HEIs gave us a variety of



information on how they allocate housing, including providing guarantees to students, from first year students or those who fit specific criteria such as care experienced or estranged.

8. On homelessness, only 4 HEIs (26%) currently track the number of students who declare themselves as homeless / vulnerably housed, however institutions have overwhelmingly had to provide emergency accommodation to students over the last four years (12 / 15 HEIs for the last two academic years). Respondents provided a variety of information regarding the support they have in place for students, including support services, retaining a number of emergency rooms to provide accommodation and liaising with the relevant local authority teams. Nearly 43% of HEIs have regular engagements with their relevant local authority to discuss their housing needs, with more than half (54%) discussing homelessness / temporary accommodation. There were also other examples of more informal discussions and issues relating to student housing arising on an ad-hoc basis.
9. We asked HEIs about providing a guarantor for student housing, as this was a policy issue raised with us during the “40 Faces” campaign that some foreign, estranged or care experienced students found challenging. Only two HEIs require a guarantor, with one additional institution noting they require parental signature if the student is under 18. Guarantors were also not required by 73% of HEIs in relation to PBSA.

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Secretaries Group

27 February 2025

Item 4: Scottish election manifestoes 2026

Purpose

1. This paper shares an update with Secretaries on the policy asks being developed by Universities Scotland to help influence the development of manifestoes by the major political parties in Scotland ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament Elections. RKEC and LTC have reviewed individual papers covering their relevant policy areas which have been summarised below.
2. This paper is **for discussion**.
 - Consider the initial policy suggestions as set out in paragraphs 6.
 - Contribute any areas in your policy remit which we have not proposed which you feel require attention.

Context

3. The date of the next Scottish election is fixed as 7 May 2026¹. Though that is still 15 months away, Universities Scotland's Director and Public Affairs team has already begun talking to each of the five main parties about the timing and process of their manifesto development. **As an organisation, our single biggest focus for the next election is on securing a commitment to put higher education funding (teaching and research) on a sustainable financial basis for the long-term, delivered through a workstream we're calling "future funding"**. That is being developed via Funding Policy Group and Main Committee, so we are not looking to get into funding models for teaching in detail in this paper/meeting. However, we do want to advance a broad range of policy and funding ideas which would support members' interests and deliver for Scotland more widely, across our full policy remit. Scotland's public finances will remain under pressure for the period 2026 to 2031 and as such, we are interested in developing no-cost and low-cost ideas as well as those that need investment to have impact.
4. Our engagement to date provides the following context for each of the five major parties:
 - As the incumbent government, the **SNP** walks the delicate line of having an existing policy and funding platform to respect but also needing fresh ideas to bring to the table. We anticipate they will continue to put policy issues such as reducing child poverty at the front of their agenda.
 - **Scottish Labour** wants to be ready early and is aiming to have narrative top-lines for its main policy areas from early 2025, from which more granular policy positions will flow. Our engagement with Scottish Labour has focused primarily on the substantial topics of future funding and regional variation in student/graduate migration policy for Scotland so far, but those conversations have strayed into other topics, such as student retention, earn-and-learn models, the approach to skills needs and workforce planning etc. In many respects, they largely share the same broad approach as the party in Westminster (except on funding models) and we have been

¹ There is some speculation that an election could be called in early spring 2025 if the minority Scottish Government can't pass its budget bill in late winter 2024/25, this isn't really an outcome any party wants and is not the assumption we are working on.

steered toward the [Secretary of State, Bridget Philipson's November '24 letter to universities in England](#), which sets out 5 priorities for the sector, on more than on occasion.

- The **Scottish Conservatives** have indicated strong support for the university role in the economy and in health, and we have had engagement with their recently appointed Spokesperson Miles Briggs on a range of policy areas.
- Initial conversations with the **Scottish Greens** have been warm where they indicated they were prepared to think in ways which may not seem typical for them if it benefited public service reform. For example, they indicated they would be receptive to policies that would support and drive greater success in university spin-outs which is not a policy area they have previously explored.
- The **Scottish Liberal Democrats** typically have one of the most HE-friendly manifestos at UK and Scotland level.
- **Reform Party Scotland**. We will need to engage with this Party in the run-up to the election as polling suggests that they will win seats. We have not done so yet.

5. The policy platform of the Scottish Greens and Scottish Liberal Democrats could prove to be important if no party takes an overall majority, as they are most likely to offer support to a minority government (either on a formal or informal basis).

Policy discussion points

6. This list is for information to share the ideas which received support from RKEC and LTC. It is not exhaustive, and we welcome ideas from Secretaries should you feel there is something from your policy areas we should consider for inclusion.
 - **Support for REG.**
 - **Funding for innovation.** Any increased investment in KEIF cannot be at the expense of REG.
 - **Cluster development.**
 - **Spin-out stickiness.**
 - **Public sector reform.**
 - **Regional and economic development.** Supporting place and regions.
 - **Cabinet portfolio to include reference to research.** Additional discussion at LTC was the current portfolio of skills should remain within the education remit.
 - **Skills.** Upskilling and reskilling, work-based learning.
 - **Widening Access.** Data sharing, evolve funding support for WA, transitions, connecting WA to child poverty agenda.
7. We should also anticipate some less desirable policy issues to re-surface as we go into the next election. Early engagement with the parties may help to pre-empt this and/or work to reshape ideas that would be detrimental to the sector. Where needed, your support with the evidence base and the wider, persuasive case would be appreciated. It will be helpful if the sector is able to take a collective position on issues like this.
8. We anticipate that some of the areas below may receive political airtime:
 - More financial regulation / reporting requirements.
 - Statutory fair work principles (Scottish Greens).
 - Duty of care for students (Currently being explored by SNP MSP Ben McPherson).
 - Statutory NDAs.
 - Transparency in admissions data (Driven by Michael Marra of Scottish Labour).

Are there other issues that we should have on our radar?

Next steps

8. Following committees discussions, we'd like to review and refine ideas over the early spring. The aim would be to combine the proposals from all Universities Scotland's policy portfolios, with a view to deeper discussion and sign-off from Principals at the Spring Strategy session in April.

Further information:

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