



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 7 March 2018

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

8th Meeting 2018, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Shirley-Anne Somerville (Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 7 March 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the eighth meeting in 2018 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting. We have received apologies for today's meeting from Richard Lochhead, who is not here due to a family bereavement; Clare Adamson is attending the meeting in his place. Mary Fee has indicated that she will arrive late as she is attending the meeting of another committee that she sits on.

The first item of business is a decision on whether to take in private item 3, which is a review of today's evidence. Are members content to take item 3 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Ask the Minister

10:00

The Convener: The next item of business is the first of a series of three ask-the-minister evidence sessions. Today, we will hear from the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science and from Government officials. The session will focus mainly on widening access to education.

I welcome Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science; Dr Paul Smart, the head of the colleges, young workforce and Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council sponsorship division; and Dr Roddy Macdonald, the head of the higher education and science division. I understand that the minister would like to make a short opening statement.

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Thank you, convener. I am very happy to appear before the committee this morning to discuss widening access to higher education and other issues that the committee sees fit to raise.

As I set out in Parliament yesterday, I believe that education is by far the most effective means that we have to improve the life chances of our young people. The Scottish Government is firmly committed to equity and excellence in higher education and to ensuring that every young person, no matter their background, can access learning that will provide them with skills and qualifications. The same should apply to adult returners to the education system.

Widening access is about access not just to fresher fairs, but to graduation days and beyond. Ensuring that students from the most deprived communities in Scotland are supported to achieve their aspirations into, through and beyond higher education is core to that.

As members are aware, the commission on widening access reported in March 2016 and made 34 recommendations, which were accepted in full by the Scottish Government. Since the publication of "A Blueprint for Fairness", we have made good progress by appointing the commissioner for fair access, embedding our targets in university outcome agreements, introducing a full, non-repayable bursary of £7,625 for young care-experienced students and establishing an access delivery group to oversee delivery.

The purpose of the access delivery group, which I chair, is to enable quarterly reporting on the co-ordination and implementation of delivery of the

commissioner's recommendations, as well as providing a forum for strategic discussion on widening access with sector-wide stakeholders. The group brings together all those with a responsibility for delivery of the recommendations, those leading delivery projects and other key stakeholders. Members include representatives of the higher and further education sectors, students, schools and the early years sector, and the commissioner for fair access, who is an observer.

As members will be aware, the commissioner published his first annual report in December and made 23 recommendations. Most of the recommendations build on areas that were considered by the commission on widening access, but he also identified some new areas for consideration. The recommendations for the Scottish Government, the Scottish funding council and universities rightly present challenges to us all to drive widening access further and faster.

I set out my response to the commissioner's report in Parliament yesterday. Addressing the commissioner's request for clarity on Government priorities with regard to our targets and ambitions for access, I made it clear that our priority is access to education for learners of all ages. Our current priority is access to university, which is where the greatest inequalities lie. I also made clear my support for the commissioner's recommendations on articulation, bridging programmes and contextualised admissions, and I fully accepted his recommendations for the Scottish funding council. To support that, the Scottish Government has delivered a real-terms increase in the budget for higher education, protecting the principles of free tuition and widening access, and ensuring that further progress can be made.

Good progress is being made. Last year, there was a 13 per cent increase in the number of Scots from our most deprived communities—more than 600 additional people—being accepted to study at a Scottish university. Figures that were published last week also showed that the percentage of school leavers going into higher education from the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland has increased to its highest level in six years. However, I am clear that there is more to do if we are to reach our targets and realise our ambitions, so I will continue to ensure that I do all I can to make that happen in Government, in the funding council and across the sector itself.

I am happy to take members' questions.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. You will be aware that the committee invited questions from members of the public for today's session with you, so before I invite questions from members of the committee I would like to start by asking a question that we have received from one of those

members of the public. Rachael Devanney would like to know:

"What work is being carried out to ensure that students who obtain university places but remain at home and commute to university/work part time are able to access to full range of services offered by higher education institutions and other agencies (such as mental health facilities and financial advice) as most of the work seems to be focused on those who move away from home?"

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important that any institution looks at all its students, regardless of where they live or where they have come from. Universities, and indeed colleges, have an obligation to look after their students, so we would expect services to be available whether a student resides on campus or stays at home. There will be different challenges for a student who does not reside on campus, and I have spoken to young people in their sixth year who are thinking of going to university about whether they want to leave home to go into halls or to stay at home. I know that students who commute back and forward to university may feel that they miss out on some of the social supports. Universities take that seriously as well, so Rachael Devanney raises an important point. The universities are aware of the issue and the Government, through the funding council, is keen to ensure that we analyse information about, for example, mental health or the equally safe project to protect students in their study environment.

The Convener: I get the whole social thing—that is clearly just the price that someone pays for deciding to stay at home—but why would there be any difference in relation to mental health facilities or financial advice?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There should not be, but there may be a perception among young people that, because they commute in, go to a class and then travel home, they are not taking part in the wider campus experience, which might give them a greater feeling of belonging to a community. The universities and colleges are keen to ensure that that community feel is brought to all students. If students feel that they do not have the same access, that is something that needs to be dealt with, because there certainly should be universal support for all our students.

The Convener: I appreciate that. A number of questions have come in from members of the public. I am sure that they will not all get asked today, but our intention is to write to you with those questions and send the responses back to those who participated.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Throughout his recommendations, Professor Sir Peter Scott has emphasised the need to look at the bigger picture in higher education and the fact that the widening access policy does not

necessarily focus on Scottish index of multiple deprivation 20 students, but can affect a whole range of students. Given what you said yesterday, is the Scottish Government minded to increase the number of funded places in the system, so that there is no potential displacement?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said yesterday in the chamber, there is no evidence of displacement at the moment, but there is a fear of displacement, as the commissioner has said. I suggest that we need to get back to basics on that. When it comes to widening access, we need to change the system. You can extend a system to infinity, but that does not necessarily make it fair. We have an unfair system at the moment, and unfair displacement when it comes to publicly funded university places. That is why we need to look at making systemic change.

When we look at the existing system, we see a variety of different ways in which institutions can look to widen access. We have universities that are taking a very quick pace. For example, Abertay University is looking at contextualised admissions—it is looking to make those changes. In recent correspondence, Abertay suggested to me that 107 of the students who joined it in September 2017 received offers with reduced qualification requirements, 63 of whom needed those lower offers in order to gain admission to university. It has changed its system because it recognised that the system was unfair. In comparison, another university, which I will not name, suggested to me that the best way to tackle widening access concerns would be to give it more places.

Universities can either change their systems to make them fair—as Abertay has done—or look to extend unfair systems. I want them to change the systems to make them fair. That will reassure people about who goes to university, which will be based on fairness and a level playing field, regardless of where students come from.

Liz Smith: Thank you for that, minister. Many people think that there is unfairness in the current structure in relation to funding, because there are Scottish Government-funded places and there are places that are available to international students and those from the rest of the United Kingdom, who pay fees. Therefore, there is an inherent difference in the way in which the money goes into universities. The point that Sir Peter Scott raises is that, if there is a specific target for 20 per cent of students to come from SIMD 20 by 2030, there will be displacement unless more funded places are made available. That is a fact. What is the Scottish Government's answer to that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: My answer is that, last year, we saw a 13 per cent increase in the number of students who came from the most

deprived communities, as I said in my opening statement. We also saw, overall, a record number of Scots being accepted by universities, which tends to counter the argument that people were displaced. We saw both an increase in the number of students from deprived communities and an increase in the overall number of Scots going to university.

I hear the concerns about displacement, and I understand that they will be raised. However, the way to deal with them is not continually to look at tinkering with the system but to make that system fair. I hope that we all want a system for university places that is fair for every young person or adult returner. We are looking at using the publicly funded places that we have fairly, creating a level playing field that will ensure that everyone has the opportunity of getting to the university of their choice.

Liz Smith: With respect, minister, there are Scotland-domiciled students out there who leave school very well qualified but who find it increasingly difficult to get into university despite the improving trends. Am I wrong to say that some of them will be displaced by the system unless more funded places are made available?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: You mention people who are well qualified. I caution against thinking that looking at someone's qualifications, whether they are a young person or an adult returner, is the only way of determining whether they should get into university. It is now widely accepted that qualifications are only one part of the story of someone's application for a university place. Qualifications are exceptionally important, and we should encourage young people to continue to aspire to gain a high level of qualifications, but they are only one part of the story. The approach is about ensuring that we have a fair system in which those who perhaps do not have that level of qualifications but who are equally capable of going to university and succeeding have the chance to do that. It is about universities taking the qualifications on board but then also looking at the wider picture of what a person presents to them. That is a fair way of looking at it, rather than perhaps just looking at one of the more traditional aspects—the exams that someone passed at school—as the only way to measure success.

Liz Smith: I completely accept that it is about not just qualifications but a much broader picture of a student. That has always been the case. That story, as you describe it, could be a very strong one for some Scotland-domiciled students who are well qualified. However, the point that I am getting at is that, because of the policy on widening access and the very severe cap, they will not have the same access to university that exists at present. What would you say to a student—or their

parents or teacher—who finds that they are displaced by that system?

10:15

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is the case that we have a cap on the number of places for Scottish and European Union students, but we have increased the number of places since 2013—in particular, we have increased the number of places for students who have come through a widening access or articulation route. We will continue to look at that.

I would say to any young person or adult returner and their family that the Scottish Government is determined to create a fair system in which everyone will have an opportunity to go to university if that is the right avenue for them to go down. I hope that we can all agree that having a fair system that provides a level playing field is the right way to proceed.

Liz Smith: Is it the case that, in that context, you are not ruling out removing the cap and increasing the number of funded places?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said yesterday, the decisions on capping and the number of places are taken through the annual budgetary process. That is how those decisions are made. I also said yesterday that universities and the sector should not wait in the hope that there will be a change in the cap or a decrease in demand from elsewhere that will enable them to widen access. We are requiring systemic change, and that is what we are determined to bring about.

The Convener: Two members have short supplementary questions.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I am not quite sure why the cap should be determined by the budget process rather than by educational policy, but perhaps we can explore that further.

There is a danger of conflating two separate issues, the first of which is about the consequence of actively choosing to address the situation whereby some young people are not operating on a level playing field. I see the widening access process as being about restoring the balance and making it fair for those young people.

The other issue is not about displacement because young people are unfairly getting access to a place; it is about the fact that there is competition for certain courses, as a consequence of which there is rationing by qualification. People can no longer access courses that they would have been able to access five or 10 years ago, simply because of the cap. Is the Scottish Government prepared to look at that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The decision on capping is connected to the budget process because we have a financial requirement to fund the relevant number of places. Any decision that resulted in a change to the cap would have a financial implication. Therefore, it is for the Scottish Government and Opposition parties to put forward proposals if they wish the cap to increase.

Johann Lamont: With respect, budget choices follow policy decisions—first, the policy decision is made and then the funding is worked out. It is not a case of saying, “We don’t have a view on the cap; the budget will determine that.”

There is a serious question here. I have been told that it is more difficult for Scottish students to do certain courses at university than it was 10 years ago. I assume that you do not think that that is acceptable. Are you willing to look at the unintended consequences of having a cap? That is resulting in competition for places and rationing by qualification, which we would not have had five or 10 years ago.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am certainly not saying that the budget determines what we do with regard to universities. I am saying that if any party wants to change the level of capped places, that has a financial implication. It is absolutely the case that we should determine the policy, but we need to recognise that that has a financial implication.

I appreciate Johann Lamont’s point about what is sometimes called grade inflation, whereby the challenge of getting on a particular course has increased as demand has increased. That is why it is important that we look at minimum entry standards and contextualised admissions, which universities are starting to take on board. We want more progress to be made, and we want the pace of change to increase.

With regard to Johann Lamont’s concern about people’s ability to get on to different courses, there are different methods of achieving that. Part of the widening access process is about looking at the minimum entry standards that a young person or adult returner would require to meet to successfully secure a place on a particular course, and that is being done in the context of the widening access framework.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Only five universities seem to be involved in the articulation into second or third year of students with higher national diplomas and higher national certificates. If more universities went down that route, could funding be allocated differently to allow more places to be available in first year?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Articulation has a number of benefits. It benefits the student, because it recognises the level of study that they have already reached and, if they have full

articulation, it does not necessarily require them to repeat a year. Gillian Martin is right to point out that it makes smarter use of the system. If we ensure that a student can get into the second or third year of a course, we are making better use of the funded places that we have available.

Gillian Martin is also right to point out that relatively few universities have widespread full articulation. The colleges and universities are looking at that, but the more that we can encourage them to take that on board, the better it will be for the students and, I would suggest, for the colleges and universities, from the point of view of the publicly funded places in the entire system.

Liz Smith: I have a question that relates to the minister's answer on minimum entry requirements. Yesterday, the minister and I had an exchange about data. The universities, and the university principals who were in front of the committee last year, have told the committee that they do not have access to certain data. They want to know the achievement levels of secondary 6 pupils in the SIMD quintile, as a trend—it does not have to be last year's information—because that makes it easier for the universities to assess what their minimum entry requirements should be. I would have thought that that data should be available. When will the universities get that information? It is an important issue in relation to offering minimum entry requirements to SIMD 20 pupils.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Absolutely. Following our exchange in the chamber yesterday, I looked into that further with officials. Unfortunately, the matter seems to have been dealt a blow by the poor weather last week. The data working group was due to have met last Friday, when the attainment data was to have been considered. The data working group includes Universities Scotland representation. I understand that the meeting has been rearranged for this Friday. That will be the group's first opportunity to meet.

Attainment is not the only issue that the working group will look at—it will want to investigate a number of issues involving data—but the request from the universities for that data will be presented to the group. As I said, the meeting would have taken place last Friday if anyone had been able to make it to Glasgow.

Liz Smith: That is very helpful. Presumably that data is available for the past eight or 10 years, and it would be extremely helpful to universities, when they are setting their minimum entry requirements—as distinct from the thresholds—so that they know the level of attainment that SIMD 20 students are likely to have. The more that that can be speeded up, the better.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The information is available, although it is not easily available. The analysts have worked hard to ensure that the data is made available in response to the request from universities.

I return to the point that I made to Liz Smith yesterday, which is that we do not have to wait to get that data to get moving on widening access. Universities may wish to see the data so that they can look at attainment levels, and they may want to see it so that they can analyse where the demand for places will go, but not having the data does not prevent them from changing to minimum entry requirements or moving on widening access.

The data may be interesting, I am sure that it will be insightful and it may, indeed, assist universities in the future, but there is absolutely no reason—as demonstrated by the Abertay example that I mentioned earlier—why universities cannot just get on and deal with contextualised admissions and minimum entry requirements without that data being available.

Liz Smith: To be fair to the universities, I do not think that they are saying that they want to stop that process, because a lot of them have worked very hard to get there. In the context of what Professor Sir Peter Scott said about the dataset not being complete, and what Petra Wend, Sally Mapstone and Susan Stewart said when they came to this committee about feeling that more data should be available, the universities say that it is particularly relevant to have that data for the SIMD quintile.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I gave the commitment to Sally Mapstone at the first, or perhaps the second, meeting of the access delivery group on which she sits along with Petra Wend and Susan Stewart that we will do everything we can to ensure that data is made available for them to analyse. However, in the meantime, we will progress with the information that we have, because we know that we need to make those changes now.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Good morning, minister. I have been reading up on some of the evidence that has been given to the committee, as I am not a full-time committee member. I was really interested in some of the evidence concerning the SIMD; we have talked quite a bit about that today. I understand that you need to be able to benchmark, measure and evidence the success of the widening access process.

However, because the SIMD is a geographical rather than a personal-experience definition of deprivation, there will be people who do not fall into the deprivation category but who may well suffer from deprivation in every sense that

someone living in those areas would. Is there any plan to widen the reach of the fair access initiative to cover people in such situations? I am also interested in your views on the strengths and weaknesses of the SIMD as a benchmark.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The commission on widening access looked in detail into the strengths and weaknesses of the SIMD. It recognised that there were weaknesses in a system that is based on area deprivation and realised that it imposes some limitations on how we can analyse the information and develop policy from it. However, it reached the conclusion that the SIMD was the best available data source and that is why the commission recommended that it should be used for the targets and analysis of widening access. We recognise that further work is needed.

The data working group that I mentioned to Liz Smith will look at other aspects—whether that is free school meals or individual indicators—to analyse that data to see what it brings out. However, I go back to the point that, while there are limitations when we use the SIMD and it is not the perfect measurement of deprivation, the commission has determined that it is the best measurement that we have.

We should continue pressing on at pace with widening access while the data working group looks at different aspects to see whether there are other individual markers that can be used, or different ways of analysing the system so that we are getting a better range of information out for the funding council, for the Government in making its policies and for institutions to be able to meet their targets and ensure that their outreach work is working properly.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Is introducing the learner journey and the unique learner number still a commitment? If it is, when will that happen?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are committed to looking very seriously at that issue. I know that Professor Scott discussed it with the committee in a fair bit of detail when he was here a few weeks ago. Officials are looking at how that can be taken forward, but the issue is very complex. Professor Scott and other stakeholders have suggested some of the advantages that a unique learner number would have.

However, this is a very sensitive issue, and we are looking at considerations around the data that is collected and who it is seen by. After all, we are talking about data sharing across the education sector, which should never be done lightly; we need to be very aware of the sensitivities in that respect.

Stakeholders have seen advantages in having a unique learner number, and they are absolutely

right to do so. However, officials will look at the sensitivities around that and the challenges of bringing in such a system. We will look at the advantages and disadvantages, and ministers will take a decision in due course.

10:30

Tavish Scott: I totally understand the liberal—with a small l—arguments about data sharing, which we have been through in other areas of late, but Professor Scott set out some pretty decent arguments in favour of it, including the ability to track an individual through the system to ensure that we understand the best way of supporting that individual and the best choices that they can make. Do such arguments outweigh the quite understandable concerns that exist about data sharing and, indeed, about the complexity of a system that is already pretty complex? After all, we do not track anyone at the moment.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I appreciate where Professor Scott is coming from on this; he is looking at it through the policy perspective of what would make it easier to track a young person—or, indeed, someone returning to the education system—through the learner journey. However, I would not in any way want to diminish the sensitivities and complexities around data sharing; I am sure that I do not have to tell the committee that.

I reassure the committee that, when we ask officials to look at this issue in great detail, we will also ensure that our widening access and learner journey outcomes can be completed, even if a unique learner number is not in place. Although it might have advantages, it will not be a barrier to widening access or what we are looking at through our learner journey work.

Tavish Scott: You used that wonderful ministerial phrase “in due course”, which I might well have used in the past myself. What does it actually mean here? I would rather that we decided that this was not the right thing to do for reasons that you might not yet have in full, because there is no point in our coming back in a year’s time, saying, “This could be an option” and getting Professor Scott to come along, only for him to ask us, “Why haven’t you done anything about this?” Are you going to try to take a decision on this in the next number of months?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I think that the Deputy First Minister said recently that we are looking to report back on the learner journey work in the coming months, and I expect that the unique learner number will be part of that work, too. I hope that that helps.

Tavish Scott: With any luck, then, that will happen before the summer recess, so that the

Parliament can be updated on the learner journey work.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Indeed.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I will ask you another question about retention as well as a question that has been submitted to the committee.

I have been most struck by the fact that our students from disadvantaged or non-traditional backgrounds are less likely to stay to second year, more likely to obtain a general degree rather than honours and less likely to get a first or a 2:1. You made it clear in your statement that widening access is not just about freshers week but about success at university. What is the Scottish Government doing on that issue? In answer to a question of mine in the chamber yesterday, you said that you are looking to

“intensify the outcome agreement process”

with

“more ambitious and challenging targets”—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2018; c 40.]

around retention. Can you expand on that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I have brought the matter up in my discussions with university principals right from my very first meeting with them. There is a level of understanding and awareness in the sector that the issue needs to be looked at.

I have been keen to encourage intensification of the work on the retention of, and the outcomes for, graduates. When Audit Scotland previously looked at outcome agreements, it suggested that we sometimes need to use those more robustly and ensure that they are detailed enough without being too wordy. When we look at intensification, we try to focus on key issues and ensure that we are driving serious progress on them.

There must be a clear line of sight from my policy priority on retention and outcomes through my letter of guidance to the Scottish funding council to the outcome agreements of separate institutions. We are ensuring that decisions on funding and activities in key areas are looked at through that letter of guidance and through the outcome agreements process.

We are doing detailed work on retention and outcomes to challenge universities to go further than they are going at the moment. As I have said, many universities do exceptionally good work on retention, but we need to see that work system wide.

The figures in the commissioner’s report make for sobering reading. Therefore, in my letter of guidance this year, I will continue to consider

whether more needs to be done on retention and outcomes.

Ruth Maguire: When the commissioner gave evidence to the committee, he mentioned that changes need to be made to attitude and culture. He spoke about the notion, in the United States, of stepping out of education rather than dropping out of education—that is, the ability to return to education. The challenges that young people have in their lives do not disappear when they go to university. Should there be a more flexible approach?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Tavish Scott mentioned the learner journey. I saw a fascinating example of that when I spoke to young people in the working groups about those returning to university. Some initially went on a course and decided that it was not right for them and later returned; others said that they should not have gone to university in the first place and decided that the best place for them was at a college, because that was where they could develop their career.

We have a system that, in many ways, assumes a linear projection through fifth and sixth years and then on to four years at university, but that is not how real life is for many of our young people, and the system certainly does not make it easy for adult returners.

Nothing in the system prevents young people from leaving then returning to university, but it is neither necessarily transparent nor easy to do that. The learner journey shows that our system often assumes a nice, simple linear projection for people as they work through the education system. However, if that is not how real life is for a young person, the system needs to be flexible.

I found Sir Peter Scott’s discussions on dropping out exceptionally interesting. We should look at the issue in the access delivery group.

Ruth Maguire: I will now ask a question that was emailed to us. The issue resonates with me because I have a young constituent who was at the blind school and is considering his next destination. Elaine Brackenridge, who is the headteacher at the Royal Blind school in Edinburgh, asks the following question.

“Disabled pupils, including those who are vision impaired, still need more support to ensure they can have the same chances to progress to university or college as other pupils. What is the Scottish Government doing to ensure pupils who are blind or partially sighted are provided with the independent living skills to allow them to study at college or university, and to support more disabled pupils to enter further and higher education?”

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I am aware that the commissioner will look at disability in his work programme for this year. It is important that we

support every young person, including those with a disability, to get into college or university. For example, the disability sports allowance is available for young people or anyone who wants to get to university. That demand-led budget is available to any student who needs to access those funds to get into higher education.

Through the Scottish funding council, we provide £2.5 million to universities directly to ensure that they make changes to assist those who have a disability to go to university. There is an absolute commitment to ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or the school that they are at, are able to get to university. I would, of course, include the school that you mention.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): My question is the same as the one that I asked the commissioner a couple of weeks ago. During my time on this committee and its predecessor, the University of the West of Scotland, Glasgow Caledonian University and the Open University have been consistently good at getting pupils from the lower 20 per cent band to attend university. UWS hit the 20 per cent figure on numerous occasions. Those institutions have argued that there should be a case that, because they are delivering Government policy in giving students the support that they need during their second and third years, they should be supported more so that they can continue to deliver what the Government wants.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said yesterday, in my statement, when I talk about widening access to university, I mean all universities. However, I recognise that the level of SIMD 20 entrants to universities varies significantly, and George Adam is right to point out the strides that have been made by UWS and others in that area.

We look for each institution to reach the target that it has been set by the commission, and it is important that each institution is asked to do that. We will not achieve our national widening access targets solely on the basis of the hard work that has already been done by UWS or Glasgow Caledonian University or by asking them to do more. We will ask the universities to continue with the widening access agenda while recognising the work that has gone before. Each university has its own challenges, whether with applications, entrants, retention or outcomes. We will ask each university to look at its statistics to see what more can be done, but there will be a specific push to ensure that the universities that are not quite achieving their 10 per cent target already can do so.

When we look at the number of people that would be required for some universities to get up to their 10 per cent target, we see that it is not

many. That is why we will continue to push every institution. Through the outcome agreement process, we will hold discussions with UWS and, indeed, every other university to consider the work that has already been done and ensure that everyone does the best that they can through the four measures that I have spoken about.

George Adam: When I asked the same question of Sir Peter Scott, he suggested that the situation with UWS, Glasgow Caley and the OU might have been cultural and that people from deprived backgrounds would be more likely to identify with those institutions than with others. He said something like, "Robes and bonnets are not for the likes of me," and I understand that argument. Is there a role in keeping the ancient traditions of such institutions, given the cultural role that they can play, while, at the same time, making them not so threatening to individuals who are, in some cases, living away from home for the first time?

10:45

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I heard Sir Peter Scott's evidence on robes, and I presume that he meant St Andrews. We do not want any of our ancient universities to lose any of their traditions or anything of what makes them world-class institutions where people from around the world want to come and study. However, we also want people to come from Paisley or my home town of Kirkcaldy and feel welcome, whether at St Andrews or at any of our ancient universities.

The new principal of St Andrews university is a lady who takes that issue very seriously. She is looking at what more can be done both to have people see St Andrews as the great institution that it is and to encourage them to go there. Individuals pick their university for a variety of reasons—it is a very individual choice that young people and adult returners make—but they need to know that they will be welcome and supported throughout their course wherever they choose to go.

George Adam: I have one final question, which is on SIMD. It is constantly said that Ferguslie Park, in my constituency, is the area in Scotland with the worst deprivation because of the way in which SIMD is measured, but only two or three streets in Ferguslie Park are like that. Using Ferguslie Park as an example, how do we—and you, as a minister—make sure that, when they are 15 or 16 years old, a young person from Ferguslie Park still has the dreams and aspirations of going to university that they—like everyone else—were born with, whether they want to go to St Andrews or somewhere else? Culturally, how do we get that young man or woman into that position?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is important that we take a whole-system approach, which is why we have people on the access delivery group who represent primary and secondary schools and councils. We want to ensure that the work that we do on outcome agreements and outreach is genuinely effective. The Scottish funding council goes into schools, and each university does outreach work with schools, so the framework for fair access will look at the effectiveness of what is going on. There is an exceptional amount of hard work going on at each institution, but we need to know whether it makes a difference or changes young people's perceptions of themselves and their ability to go to university.

In that context, I stress a point that I made yesterday. Everybody at school, from a very early age, should have the confidence to pick the path that is right for them. In some cases, that will be university; in others, it will be college, an apprenticeship or employment. Each of those paths must be equally valued and must be the correct course for the young person to go down. The people who are growing up in George Adam's constituency and around Scotland must not only know that university is for them and that they can go there but must pick the course that is right for them and for what they want to do. We must give them the confidence to do that. That is why we are looking at our outreach work through the funding council and why the framework for fair access will look at what happens in the totality to ensure that money is being spent wisely.

The Convener: I saw a photo of George Adam wearing a bonnet, yesterday, and it was very fetching. It was not a St Andrews bonnet, right enough, but do not do yourself down, George.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am interested in and fully support the position that the minister has set out in relation to the need to inspire confidence in young people. Is there not a practical consideration alongside that about giving them the opportunity to get the qualifications that they need to get to university? Yesterday, I asked about advanced highers. Has any analysis been done of the provision of highers and advanced highers in schools in SIMD 20 areas? From a constituency perspective, what is the provision in smaller rural secondary schools?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Going back to the whole-system approach, it is important that we analyse whether, when a young person decides that they want to go to university to study a particular course, they can access the courses at school that will allow them to do that. We are seeing a lot of collaboration between different high schools, and within the Glasgow Caledonian hub we are seeing another way of ensuring that there is access to advanced highers.

I think I said this yesterday, so I apologise if I am repeating myself. In the work that we are doing on the learner journey, we are looking to see whether there are any barriers to young people picking particular careers or moving forward that are based on what is available in their senior phase. We recognise that that is an important part of a young person's journey through school and on to an apprenticeship, college or university. It is part of the learner journey work and, as I said to Tavish Scott, we will report back on that in the coming months.

Oliver Mundell: Okay. Let us briefly go back to the previous issue and displacement. My understanding is that thousands of students who apply to universities in Scotland do not get a place at all. I wonder what analysis has been done of why those students are missing out.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is difficult to determine why a particular individual does not get a place at a particular university. The commissioners looked at the requirement for much more transparency around the admissions process.

As autonomous institutions, universities are rightly responsible for their own admissions processes, and they will look at different inputs into that, whether those are examination results, which we talked about earlier, or personal statements. The difficulty that a young person has is in trying to work out what they have to do and then how much bearing it is given during the admissions process. It is then very difficult to work out why a young person did not get in. Was it because of a personal statement not being strong enough? Was it because of exam results? The work that Sir Peter Scott is doing on transparency in the admissions process will help to look at that.

At the moment, we have statistics on applications and on applicants, and those are broken down by institution. However, those statistics do not tell us why young people do not get a place at one institution but do get a place at another. Quite rightly, the admissions process is different at each university—we would expect nothing less from autonomous institutions—but we do not have the transparency that allows young people to understand it, and, therefore, learn what they have to do in their sixth year to gain entry or at least have a better chance of gaining entry.

The issue of transparency needs to be looked at. I think that we will come back to it in due course, either through the commissioner's work or through the access delivery group, because the commissioner raised it in his annual report.

Oliver Mundell: I will explain what worries me. Other committee members have said the same thing. I regularly meet young people, and I have

spoken to headteachers with pupils who have exceeded the entry requirements. When those headteachers phone institutions to ask why young people from their schools have not been successful, they are told that the applications met the required standard but that the competition was too great.

I feel that those young people are also missing out—and, in some cases, they fall into the SIMD 20 group. We are not seeing those young people go on to higher education; therefore, other pupils from their schools decide that they cannot compete at the level that is required for those courses. That creates a perception that then creates another problem.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is why it is important that we look at transparency to ensure that young people understand why decisions are made. The examples are often not as clear cut as the ones that Oliver Mundell has cited, in which they are given that categorical answer. We then have to look at grade inflation. I discussed that issue in response to Johann Lamont's question on how we can tackle the problem through creating minimum entry requirements, particularly in SIMD 20 areas. However, if there were greater understanding about why and how decisions are made, that would make the system much more effective.

Oliver Mundell: My final question is about a more immediate concern. In the past few weeks, a number of teachers in my constituency have got in touch to say that they are concerned that the new higher exam materials will not be ready for them to start teaching with in June. Do you recognise that that creates an issue—particularly in state schools, and for both teachers and pupils—for pupils getting through their highers and achieving the best results that they can? Will you commit to looking at that?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That issue has not come across my desk, as schools are within the remit of the Deputy First Minister. However, I will ensure that Mr Mundell's comments are passed on to him for his information following today's meeting.

Gillian Martin: I want to talk more about articulation, which I brought up with Sir Peter Scott when he was here. I noted that, in his report, he was particularly strong on the fact that we still have an issue with a lot of universities not having the same culture around accepting HND and HNC graduates into their institutions at second or third-year level as some of the newer universities perhaps do. Given that universities are autonomous—rightly so, as we have discussed—I asked Professor Scott whether, realistically, there was anything that the Government or the SFC

could do to encourage such universities to take a fresh approach.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The universities are looking at that very seriously. Following the commissioner's report, Universities Scotland had a workstream on articulation, which was chaired by Susan Stewart. It has come up with a number of proposals for universities to adopt. It is setting up new working groups with colleges, which are co-chaired with college principals, to look at articulation. It is welcome to see the sector, in totality, taking a much greater interest in that issue and working hand in hand with colleges to see that happen.

My concern is about the fact that we still do not know from Universities Scotland when we might expect to see change and how much we might see. We would have looked at the issue in discussing the commissioner's annual report, but that meeting was also cancelled because of the bad weather last week. We would have looked at the requirement for a little bit more information about when change will happen and how large it will be at different institutions. It is good to see further progress on the issue, but I want to see the detail about when that might happen.

You asked what the Government and the funding council could do. I return to the outcome agreements process, in which we are looking very carefully at what we can do on articulation within the terms of my letter of guidance. For example, I am interested in looking into the targets on articulation that Sir Peter Scott suggested. We will discuss those with the sector and with key stakeholders before any decision is made, and we will do that in the access delivery group.

As I said yesterday, a tremendous amount of work is being done within the sector to take up the areas around widening access still further. Last week, we looked at the templates and delivery around the recommendations; Universities Scotland has put a tremendous amount of work into that, but we need to know in a little more detail when those changes will be made.

11:00

Gillian Martin: As a former college lecturer, many of whose students went on to university after doing their HND in the course that I taught, I know that those students did particularly well at university because they had college as a bridge from school; you will not be surprised to hear that. They included students who were quite young or those who perhaps needed the college experience in order to perform well at university. Has any work been done on analysing students who have articulated successfully into second or third year at university in terms of their final degree result or the

retention rate? Retention is one of the issues, because people who go to university at 17 can certainly find the experience a bit daunting. They could go to college first and have that student experience before going to university.

Has work been done on that? There might be a perception that students who come from college are not ready for university or are, in some way, second-quality applicants compared with someone who left school with five A-grade highers. However, that was not my experience and I wondered whether any analysis of that had been done.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I can come back to the committee with that analysis, but I agree that sometimes going to college and then to university, rather than going directly to university, is the right step for a young person. When I was in Aberdeen, I had a very interesting discussion with North East Scotland College and Robert Gordon University on the work that they do to ensure that students who perhaps started college with no concept of going to university are encouraged to do so if it is the right thing for them. The college and the university work very closely together to ensure that that works for a young person.

Much is made sometimes of the differences between college and university, and of different ways of learning, as if that should excuse us in some way from taking action because it is too difficult. Actually, the work that goes on—whether it is between NESCol and Robert Gordon University or between Forth Valley College and the University of Stirling—demonstrates that articulation works very well for students. It opens up new avenues that they perhaps would never have thought of when they were 17 or 18 and looking at the prospectuses to begin with. The Scottish Government, and the Scottish funding council, will certainly look at the issue very seriously, to ensure that we get over the perception that it is just too hard to align the curriculums. In some areas, it is exceptionally difficult to align the curriculums but, in some areas, it is not. We should get on and ensure that full articulation progresses at a greater speed than it is progressing at the moment.

Gillian Martin: I am the committee's European Union reporter, so it would be remiss of me not to mention Colleges Scotland's submission to us, which mentions EU funding programmes around employability, particularly the European social fund. Colleges Scotland has set out how much colleges in Scotland get from the ESF, and it says that a lot of the employment programmes that are run by colleges could lose out on a substantial amount of money after Brexit, which would particularly affect people who are quite far away

from the workforce. Is the Scottish Government doing any planning for that shortfall?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is a very interesting point because, often, when we talk about the implications of Brexit, we talk about them through the prism of universities. Our universities undoubtedly face major challenges because of Brexit, but we have been very aware that colleges are affected too. Michael Russell and I have met Colleges Scotland and different institutions on numerous occasions to talk through those challenges in detail. If the developing the young workforce funding that colleges receive is no longer to be made available, that will undoubtedly have a consequence. We are continuing to work with the sector to see what can be done.

As a Government, we would like there to be exceptionally close collaboration with regard to colleges and universities following on from Brexit and a continuation of many of the avenues that are available to college and university students. It is a difficult area on which to make a definitive final statement, but you can rest assured that we are working with Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland to analyse the impact of Brexit on both sectors.

Gillian Martin: It is also a perception that Erasmus affects only universities, but as someone who, as a college lecturer, took students to Finland many times, I know that Erasmus is embedded in our college programmes, too. I imagine that you are advocating that colleges be involved in the discussions on the continuation of any kind of Erasmus programme.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Absolutely. We should also remember the work that goes on in our communities as a result of that. I recently answered a question from Joan McAlpine on Erasmus+, when I put on record the Government's commitment to it. We often talk about Erasmus+ being for university students, but it has extremely important college and community aspects. The fact that 2017 was the most popular year so far for Erasmus+ in the UK is another example of how our young people want to maintain close links with Europe.

Johann Lamont: I might ask about student support later, but I have a specific question about widening access funding, and a more general question about education policy.

It is my understanding that, in the past, universities would have been funded specifically for widening access places, but now the guidance says that that funding has been mainstreamed into the core funding. What leverage will you have over those universities that have stepped away from

their responsibility to widen access, while others have stepped up to the challenge?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We provide £51 million a year for widening access and articulation places in the universities. I go back to my point about the need to ensure that we change the system and make it fair. We will do that through the outcome agreements process, whereby each university is required to look carefully at its aspirations and targets on widening access. The Scottish funding council will hold the universities to account through the intensification of the outcome agreements process.

We take the issue very seriously. We want to ensure that every university plays its part, and we will do that through the outcome agreements process, which every university goes through on an individualised basis.

Johann Lamont: I do not think that I understand that, but that might just be me. In the past, moneys went to universities for widening access places, but now that is part of their core funding. What leverage do you have over universities that do not step up to the plate?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I said—

Johann Lamont: What I am interested in is the rationale behind the changing of the position.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We still provide funding of £51 million per annum for widening access.

Johann Lamont: Is that money not mainstreamed? The guidance says that the funding has been mainstreamed into the universities' core funding.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It is provided as part of our requirement to ensure that there are widening access and articulation places. The outcome agreements process is important, because I do not want the issue to be one that we attempt to sort out by making provision for a certain number of places for widening access and a certain number of places for articulation through certain funding streams. I want the system to change, and the system will change only if we hold the institutions to account through the outcome agreements process.

Although we will continue to look seriously at our funding, at widening access, at retention and at the work that the SFC does through its strategic funds on widening access, we will not solve the issue of widening access unless we change the system in its entirety, and the way to do that is through the intensification of outcome agreements.

Recently, we have published the initial proposals for university and college funding. The universities and colleges will work with the funding

council to analyse the draft outcome agreements in relation to how ambitious they are, and the final allocation of funding will be based on their outcome agreements, which they will agree with the funding council.

Johann Lamont: Will there be financial penalties for universities that do not meet targets?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have said, the initial allocations came out last week. The funding council will now go through the draft outcome agreements with the institutions. If the institutions are not living up to our expectations when it comes to widening access or, indeed, other strategic matters for the Government, you will see a change in the funding allocation from that through the drafting process.

Johann Lamont: Has any analysis been done to find out what courses young people from deprived areas are going into? I am sure that you share my concern about the possibility that, although we are widening access, we might end up with the same folk going into in the professions—medicine and law—for which there is a great deal of competition, while other young people will not have access to those courses, even though we are trying to level the playing field.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We can furnish the committee with the information on that. The data working group, which I have mentioned in a number of answers, will be examining that area to see what more information can be pulled out.

The issue that you raise regarding the professions is one that we recognise. That is why there is specific funding from the funding council for initiatives to encourage young people into the professions from high schools that do not have a great background in ensuring that young people get into law, medicine, dentistry and so on. That funding is designed to encourage young people at quite an early stage in the senior phase to think about what else they have to do in that regard, because it is not only their grades that are important but their personal statements and the other work that they do.

Johann Lamont: What conversations do you have with your colleagues in education on the impact of the budget choices that are being made further down the system, which will inevitably impact on widening access? Currently, for example, we are seeing fewer support staff, fewer home link teachers and fewer people who support young people who need to get embedded in the education system at primary and secondary school. That must inevitably have a consequence for young people with regard to them even thinking about going to university, let alone competing with others.

What representations have you and other ministers who are involved in education made to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution around some of the choices that he is making, which, in my view, are extremely damaging to the longer-term capacity for young people to even think about going to university?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Of course, the choices around education are for local authorities to make within the budgetary process. We look seriously—

Johann Lamont: With respect, minister, did you make a representation to the finance secretary about the budget choices that you would like to be made in relation to enabling local authorities to ensure the delivery of support at school level that would allow young people to even think about going on to further and higher education? Having the power to make decisions around budget priorities is a wonderful power to have. You have that power. What representations have you and your education colleagues made to the finance secretary in that regard?

11:15

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We have seen a real-terms increase for universities and colleges following the budget process that we have just gone through, and that will ensure—

Johann Lamont: What representations did you make as ministers? I am not asking what the budget is; I am asking what your role is in influencing the budget.

The Convener: And now let the minister answer.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I would like to think that the information that the committee has through the budget process, which has demonstrated the real-terms increase for universities and colleges, is testimony to the hard work put in by education ministers when making representations to the finance secretary. Decisions for local councils are for them to make and to be responsible for at a local level.

Johann Lamont: Young people are even less likely to consider going on to further and higher education. That decision is made at school level, which means that it is nothing to do with you, but if people go to university, that is your responsibility and you are increasing that budget. Do you see the connection between how we fund our school system and the ability to access further and higher education? Do you accept that there is a connection?

The Convener: You are fighting the budget process that was just fought over.

Johann Lamont: No, with respect—

The Convener: That is exactly what you are doing.

Johann Lamont: I am asking the minister whether she sees a connection between the investment in school budgets and making real our shared aspiration to widening access to further and higher education.

The Convener: You have asked her that twice already.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We certainly recognise that we require a whole-system approach within education. The access delivery group includes representatives from primary schools, secondary schools and local authorities. We are very aware, particularly within the learner journey work, of the need to look at how the different sections of the education system work and collaborate, but it is for councils to make representations on the decisions that they make.

Johann Lamont: And your budget decision on local government funding does not have any impact on that.

The Convener: As I have said, we are not fighting the budget process that we have already been through.

Clare Adamson: The previous question touched on access to courses and the competition for medicine, law and dentistry. Has any work been done to look at universities that choose to have an additional application process for which students must pay a fee? The fee can be refunded to them, if they access certain benefits. Some institutions use that additional application as a selection process. Will the data working group look at whether that is having an impact on and creating an additional barrier to young people from SIMD 20 areas and their aspirations to access such subjects?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: As I have mentioned, the opaqueness of the system and its inherent barriers are certainly a concern, particularly for those who are from a high school that does not send a lot of young people to certain courses. In those cases, it is more challenging for the young person and for the school to support them. Therefore, the funding council looks to encourage initiatives to deal with such issues.

Any barrier—perceived or actual—that would prevent a young person from applying for a course needs to be looked at. Decisions on admissions are for universities, as autonomous institutions, to make, but through the access delivery group I am hopeful that we can work together—we will challenge each other where that is needed, but we work collegiately—to find a way through some of the challenges. The issue that you raise is

perhaps one of the challenges that can be a bit more easily dealt with.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The report of the student support review was published in November. In what month will the Government publish a response?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: We are hoping to reply to Parliament on that soon. I will not give a specific date or month, because we are still modelling the different proposals that we could bring forward. I do not want to come before Parliament until that work has been completed, because you would get only half an answer from the Government on some of the proposals, and we would have to come back to reply to other aspects of the review. I assure members that I am as keen to get this process moving as others are, but until we look at that financial modelling, we will not be in a position to present the full picture to Parliament.

As I said yesterday—in response to Iain Gray, I think—we are doing the financial modelling because we want to do this with the first principle of ensuring that those from the poorest backgrounds get the support that they require. We will look at the different changes that we could make and their impact on different demographics. We do not want any unintended consequences coming through from the decisions that we make so we need to look at which decisions will best assist the poorest students.

Ross Greer: A moment ago, you used the phrase “a whole-system approach within education”. I am looking for an assurance that the whole-system approach goes wider than that, because we know from evidence across decades that some of the major barriers to equal access to education are to do with housing and transport costs. The Government’s response to the transport costs issue could be simply to increase loans or—preferably—bursaries through your portfolio, to try to compensate for the rising cost of public transport, or it could consider transport policies such as fare capping or expanding concessionary travel to those in full-time education. Can you explain how the Government is taking a genuinely whole-system approach to equal access to education and not trying to tackle it simply within the education portfolio? A lot of these challenges occur outwith education but have an impact on it.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: You are absolutely right to point to the myriad of ways that these challenges could be overcome. Following the review, the review group has asked the Government to carry out further work in specific areas—I will have to look at those requests very seriously. In quite a few areas, the review group has not come back with specific

recommendations. That is by no means a criticism of the group, because it took quite a radical approach in what it suggested, particularly when it comes to further education, and it quite rightly spent a great deal of time in shaping that.

We will have to look at our response and see what we need to do as a Government on the requests that the review group asked us to look at in more detail, then we absolutely need to look at our approach not just through the prism of education but more widely. I am very mindful of that aspect as we move forward.

Ross Greer: Can I assume that, in the Government’s response, there will be evidence that you have taken a whole-system approach rather than a purely educational approach?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I certainly hope that that will come through. I am sure that Mr Gray will pick me up on it if there are aspects that we have not looked at. It is our initial response to the review and, as I said yesterday, there are some aspects that will require us to do further work. Therefore there will be opportunities for members—and indeed for members of the public and stakeholders—to feed into that process.

Ross Greer: I am going to ask a question that was submitted to us by a member of the public. From 2013, the Government made a decision to shift quite significantly from grants and bursaries towards student loans. Has any evidence been gathered on the effect that that has had on student behaviour?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The decisions that we took in 2013—for example, the decision about our guaranteed minimum income for those from the poorest backgrounds—were supported by the National Union of Students at that time. I recognise that times have moved on, which is why we have had the independent review of student support.

On assessing the impact, I suggest that we look at the recently published school leaver destination statistics, which show an increase in the number of leavers from the most deprived communities going on to higher education. We should also examine some of the statistics that I pointed to earlier, which show that, compared to the number in previous years, the number of young people from the most deprived communities who are now entering university has increased.

Ross Greer: A large amount of evidence has been gathered for the past five years, using a range of approaches. Has the Government gathered evidence specifically to assess the impact of that policy or has it looked at evidence from a range of sources and tried to draw a conclusion?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In any policy remit, it is difficult to determine the results of one policy when other aspects, such as the economic crisis a couple of years ago, may have had an effect. It is almost impossible to say that one policy changed a young person's attitude.

What we have looked at, and what we continue to take very seriously, is school leaver destinations and the number of young people who are coming through. We also take very seriously our work directly with young people, and what it is that they say influences their decisions. The work that we are doing on the learner journey has included analysis of research that Young Scot facilitated for the Scottish Government, in which we directly asked young people to describe, as best as they could, what influenced their decisions in life, such as the decision whether to do an apprenticeship or a college or university course. We have not only looked at the official statistics but made an effort to look at what influences young people.

What came through strongly in our work with young people is that they need to be encouraged to pick what is right for them and not be pigeonholed too early into being someone who will go to university, someone who will go to college or someone who will go into an apprenticeship. In our work on the learner journey, we have done the best analysis that we can of what determines a young person's views on the education process. However, as I said earlier, I would not claim that that is an exact science.

Ross Greer: I return to Gillian Martin's point about European funding. What proportion of the total funding for widening access projects comes from European funding streams? Has the Government done contingency planning in case those streams are not going to be continued or replaced?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I spoke to Gillian Martin about the college statistics, of which there is analysis through developing Scotland's workforce. Some of that might touch on widening access, but it is by no means just about widening access.

We are looking at the issue on quite a granular level to see how it will affect universities and colleges, and how different courses and academics will be affected. In colleges, the demand tends to be from EU nationals who are already resident here. The challenge in the universities will be different, because the demand tends to be from EU applicants who are not already resident here. We are working with the institutions to look at that in great detail, so that we know enough to take mitigating steps such as those suggested by Ross Greer. Instead of looking at a pot of money and deciding what it should be spent on, we need to look at the issue institution

by institution, and sometimes even course by course.

The Convener: We have been joined by Mary Fee, who has come from her other committee. Mary, I believe that you have a question about science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Thank you. I apologise to the committee, the minister and the officials. I was at a private bill committee, which explains why I am late.

I want to ask a general question and a specific question about STEM. Minister, will you give us an update on whether any work has been done to refresh and update the STEM strategy? We constantly hear that people who are interested in science subjects have issues with going on to do apprenticeships or college and university courses. Has any work been done to ensure that the right support is there so that people who are interested in science subjects do not drop out?

11:30

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Mary Fee is absolutely right that we need to look at that issue. We have not refreshed the STEM strategy, which is still quite new. However, we have an implementation group, which I chair and which looks at all the different issues. In some ways, it is comparable to the access delivery group on widening access. In the implementation group we bring all the stakeholders around the table and look at key performance indicators to ensure that there is progress on delivering the STEM strategy. The area that Mary Fee has mentioned is one that we will be keen to look at. We will also look at having a group that will advise the implementation group and will be built up from a wider pool of people to ensure that we receive timeous advice on that issue. Both the implementation and advisory groups are moving forward.

We are very aware of work that is coming through from the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which is refreshing the "Tapping all our Talents" work that it did a few years ago. Officials and I have met the RSE to see that and to offer any assistance that we can as it goes through that process. We have made progress, but I readily admit that, as that refresh work happens, it will flush out more challenges that the Government will need to take on. Therefore we are very keen to work with the RSE to provide it with any information or data that will assist it with that process.

Mary Fee: Thank you—that is helpful.

Sometimes, very young children have a particular interest in science. You will be aware

that the Scottish Schools Education Research Centre provides training for primary teachers in teaching science subjects. It also makes sure that primary schools comply with health and safety. Currently, that centre is funded by all local authorities. Will the education reforms that are being looked at have any impact on either the procurement of those services or the centre itself?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I certainly do not see any reason for there to be a change to the support that the centre receives. I understand that it also receives money from the Scottish Government, which was very pleased to be able to ensure that its work continues.

The Convener: Johann Lamont wants to come in again briefly on something that we spoke about earlier, then we will hear from Clare Adamson.

Johann Lamont: My apologies, convener. I want to go back briefly to the discussion that the minister had with Ross Greer about student support. Yesterday, the minister referred to the Government having raised the income threshold for maximum grant to £19,000. For completeness, I should say that the minister will be aware that, in 2013, the Scottish National Party Government cut the income cut-off for maximum bursary from £19,300 to £17,000. Does the minister think that it is appropriate to pitch something that is not quite a restoration of a cut as an increase? Does she accept that, notwithstanding the position of the NUS, the decision in 2013 was actually wrong because it had a direct impact on some of the people in education with the lowest income?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Yesterday, I was asked what action the Government had taken in the context of the review of student support. My answer was given to demonstrate the action that we have taken as a result of both that review and our commitment in the programme for government, and to demonstrate why we did not wait for the review of student support to conclude when it came to raising the income threshold. It was a demonstration of action that has been taken in the past few years.

As I think I said in my response to Ross Greer, the decisions that were taken to simplify the process on student support were welcomed by the NUS at the time, but I recognise that we have moved on. Circumstances change and we need to look at the process afresh. Although the decisions were taken while working hand in hand with stakeholders, and were welcomed by the NUS, it is right that we look to see what changes need to be made. That is why we asked an independent review group to look at that, and we will respond to the review in due course.

Johann Lamont: Do you accept that, notwithstanding the position of the NUS, it was

wrong to do something that has had a disproportionate impact on those who most rely on bursaries? You have now tried to right it, but you have not provided an increase and you have not quite righted it. In a way, you have almost tried—

The Convener: Those are political squabbles. Can you ask the minister a question that relates to her remit?

Johann Lamont: You might not be able to address this now, but we would be interested in the analysis that brought you to the conclusion that you should not quite restore the cut that you made, when the analysis that you had at the time justified the cut in 2013.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The decisions that we took in 2013 were about simplifying the system. We worked hand in hand with stakeholders to ensure that that happened. However, we are always open to looking at changing the system as time moves on and the challenges to our young people change. That is why we have had the independent review, to which I will respond in due course.

Johann Lamont: My apologies, but would you accept that simplifying the system is not the same as making a direct cut in the income of some of the poorest students in our communities? Making a direct cut in the bursary is not simplifying the system.

The Convener: We will move on, because the minister is here to talk about her remit, but Johann Lamont seems to be trying to rewrite history.

Johann Lamont: I am not rewriting history—I said that a cut had been presented as an increase.

Clare Adamson: As a substitute member, I want to put on record the fact that I am the vice-chair of SSERC, as it has been mentioned.

The Convener: I have a question of my own. Minister, you have talked about valuing choices other than university. I have no doubt that you, the Scottish Government and many other people value such choices, but how do we ensure that teachers, parents and pupils value those choices and do not push the university option because it might look good for the school or because they genuinely think that it is the right one? There are many parents, grandparents and others who might think that the best thing for their child or grandchild would be for them to go to university, whereas the reality is that it would be an entirely different option.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That is a very fair point. Particularly in apprenticeship week, I am very keen to encourage young people to look at the different opportunities that are available that are outwith my remit. As part of apprenticeship week, I had a very interesting visit to a school in

my constituency, on which I had a discussion about foundation apprenticeships and the new opportunities that are available to young people at school through foundation apprenticeships.

You make a critical point. It is not just the nice words that the Government says on the issue, or that we say in speeches, that matter. What matters is that we ensure that there is nothing in the system that pushes young people towards one outcome more than another. We are looking at that in the context of the learner journey, at the heart of which is parity of esteem. We must encourage young people and their influencers, whether their teachers or their family, to pick the right course for them.

I have had conversations with young people who went to university because they had the grades that allowed them to do that, but who left university, did a college course instead and went on to have a highly successful career. We need to ensure that we are all cognisant of the opportunities that our young people have. It is a question of choosing what is right for individual young people rather than what is right from the point of view of the higher and further education statistics. We need to be brave in making some changes to ensure that that happens in due course.

The Convener: I am very encouraged to hear that.

Ross Greer: There is a massive disparity in the funding that college student associations receive, which ranges from £20,000 a year to £200,000 a year. Has the Government considered ring fencing student association funding in the college funding formula?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The funding council is working with the NUS—indeed, it is still funding some work with the NUS—to encourage the growth of student associations in colleges. From my visits to colleges, I recognise the difference that such associations make in having a strong, confident and robust student body. I saw that on my recent visit to Ayrshire College, when I spoke to the student reps who sit on the college's board. That demonstrates why we must ensure that students have strong representation at college and university level.

The Convener: On that note, I bring to an end the public part of the meeting. I thank the minister, Mr Smart and Ms Macdonald for their attendance.

11:40

Meeting continued in private until 11:55.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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