Equalities and Human Rights Committee

Thursday 1 December 2016

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 1 December 2016

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EQUALITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)
*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)
David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
*Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Iain Hutchison (Disability History Scotland)
Lauren McDougall (University of Glasgow Students Representative Council)
Mark McMillan (Deaf Action)
Rebecca Scarlett (Lead Scotland)
Professor Graham Turner (Heriot-Watt University)
Christopher Wilde (University of St Andrews Students Association)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities and Human Rights Committee

Thursday 1 December 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:33]

Draft Budget Scrutiny 2017-18

The Convener (Christina McKelvie): Good morning and welcome to the 10th meeting of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. As usual, I ask everyone to ensure that mobile phones are in flight mode or switched to silent.

Agenda item 1 is our draft budget scrutiny for 2017-18. I remind everyone that Saturday 3 December is the United Nations international day of persons with disabilities, which promotes the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Today's evidence session is therefore timely and topical, as we are focusing on access to university through the widening access agenda for people with disabilities and those who use British Sign Language. This morning, we have with us representatives of a number of student groups and organisations, some of whom will be using BSL.

I am delighted to welcome our panel: Mark McMillan, who is an employability adviser with Deaf Action; Dr Iain Hutchison, who is a member of the board of Disability History Scotland; Professor Graham Turner, who is director of the centre for translation and interpreting studies in Scotland, which is based at Heriot-Watt University; Lauren McDougall, who is students with disabilities officer with the Glasgow University Students Representative Council; Rebecca Scarlett, who is senior policy and information officer with Lead Scotland; and—last but not least—Christopher Wilde, who is widening access and participation officer with the University of St Andrews Students Association.

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for attending our meeting. I thank those of you who submitted written evidence, as we greatly appreciate getting as much information as possible for our inquiry. You all know the criteria for our inquiry: we are looking at the specific aspect of widening access within the Scottish Government's budget, and we are taking evidence from students, academics and people from organisations that support students.

I note from the written evidence that some of you have sent us that there are aspects of the policy that you wish to explore further. Perhaps you can give us an insight into your experiences of representing individuals and students in universities. I am happy to open up the discussion if you are keen to put on record your thoughts and feelings in that respect. I see that Lauren McDougall is nodding, so I come to her first.

Lauren McDougall (University of Glasgow Students Representative Council): I noticed from reading the evidence that was submitted in advance of the meeting that a lot of the issues are the same across the board. For example, pre-entry advice is a big issue. A lot of students struggle with being able to find out before they get to university what life as a disabled student will be like. That issue was highlighted in all the written submissions. One thing that could help would be more advice through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service with links to organisations that can support students with their applications. That would definitely alleviate some of the pre-entry worries that students have.

Another universal issue that was raised in the submissions is the need for reasonable adjustments to be provided when people are at university. I would like to see more consistency. At present, there is a lot of luck involved in whether one student gets the same level of support as another student, depending on which higher education institution they attend. Perhaps there could be sector standards to provide at least a minimum requirement for reasonable adjustments so that students know that they are receiving the same level of support as other students at other institutions.

I am looking at some of the submissions just now to ensure that I highlight some of the key issues. One of the biggest issues, especially for students at Glasgow, is that someone cannot apply for disabled students allowance until they are registered and have accepted a place. That can create a lot of anxiety at the beginning of the semester when they do not have any support in place at all. That support can involve anything from assistive software to non-medical personal help. There are massive waiting lists, sometimes going into the second semester, to get that support in place.

We at GUSRC see a lot of students who have been really struggling with the transition to university in the first place and are struggling even more because they do not yet have the reasonable adjustments in place. That is a massive issue for student confidence and student retention. A lot of students in their first semester at university are already a bit worried that they have made that leap. Without those reasonable adjustments in place, it can be very difficult to convince students that things will get better and that they need to stick it out.

We need more focus on getting applications for disabled students allowance in before the start of the semester. If there was a standard procedure across the sector, it would not matter which institution someone was attending once they had an offer, as they could apply for DSA before they got there. For me, that is a pretty massive issue. I will stop there, as I do not want to dominate the floor.

The Convener: Thank you, Lauren—I see a lot of nodding heads. Dr Hutchison, in his written evidence, gave us some clear case studies that highlight the challenges that people face. I suspect that those are leading on from the application stage to the point at which students are attending university.

Dr Iain Hutchison (Disability History Scotland): I am labelled as being from Disability History Scotland, with which I am very involved, but in my written submission I was trying to convey my experience of university teaching, so I am speaking more with that hat on today.

Over the years, I have encountered so many students with impairing situations who have different levels of support and different opportunities to access support. Provision is very uneven. There are a lot of reasons for that. There are some very good support systems in universities, but there are also support systems that are overstretched, and staff do not always appreciate the experiences that students with an impairment are going through, which is a big issue.

That brings us to identification. It should be borne in mind that some people with impairments do not want to self-identify, and it is their right not to do that. There are many reasons why they may not want to self-identify. Often, at the beginning of a term, you can sit down with a new seminar group and the chances are that at least one student in that group will be experiencing some type of impairment-related difficulty. It is never the one whom you think it might be. Identification is a big difficulty.

If you are looking at what investment should go into higher education to improve those situations, I suggest that you look at the education of staff— not just teaching staff, but all the staff whom students might come into contact with—so that they have a wider understanding of the issues. I am sure that the ladies will say that you do not really know what childbirth is like until you have gone through it. Similarly, you do not know what having cancer or being close to someone with cancer is like until you have gone through it, and the same is true of many impairments. Staff need more education about that. In addition, the ability to empathise is very important. Those things need to be developed so that staff have a greater understanding and awareness of impairments. At the moment, the situation is very varied. Some staff are great at giving support but others, unfortunately, take the attitude that people with those "problems" should not be there. That attitude is totally wrong, but it does exist.

The Convener: That is worrying. Is it your experience that the teaching staff who are good at dealing with students with impairments are those who are always left to deal with them?

Dr Hutchison: I have taught at several universities, so I have a cross-section of experience. The common guideline for teaching staff is not to get involved with students with those particular issues but to refer them to the specialists in the counselling service or the disability service. However, for a variety of reasons, quite a lot of students are not accessing those services and it is the teaching staff who are often their first port of call. They get to know the students through the course of a module, so the students come to them.

I have always had a problem with telling such students that they cannot talk to me about their issues and that they need to go to such and such a service. I will refer them to the specialist services, but I always feel an obligation—that is the wrong word; I just feel that it is the right thing to give them as much time as they need to talk about things and to explain their difficulties.

The Convener: I think that we all understand that. On the subject of specialist services, perhaps we can hear from Mark McMillan. If a student has an impairment or disability—for example, hearing loss—-what actions are taken to support them once they have been signposted by a thoughtful teacher?

Mark McMillan (Deaf Action): *(simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language)* In my view, we really need to look at three different areas. Having been through the university system as a deaf student, I know that a lot of deaf students have similar experiences to mine. What would really help is access to communication support—that is the number 1 issue for deaf students. Deafness is very different from other disabilities, such as sight loss, because our number 1 barrier is communication. I feel that we need to look at the disabled students allowance, which is the funding that deaf people get to go through university.

09:45

DSA is not enough of a support for deaf students. I would like to explain my reasons for saying that, which are similar to those in the other submissions. When deaf students go to university, they need interpreters for lectures, working groups

and seminars, for example. They also need them socially to be able to have a full university experience. However, DSA funding is only £21,000 a year. That means that a British Sign Language user such as me can afford to fund only one interpreter. If they are lucky, they might also get a note taker. However, that is not sufficient, because the university experience involves lectures and workshops through the week and interpreters having to work solo for an entire day. I had an interpreter who had to interpret for three hours without stopping at a lecture, which really was not a good thing. In meetings and situations such as this one, there would always be two interpreters to work with a deaf person so that they could work together, take turns and ensure high quality. In the university, there was only one interpreter, who worked for long periods on their own, and that is an issue.

If a deaf person is on their own at break times and lunch breaks and tries to mix and socialise with other students with only one interpreter who needs to get away and get a break after working for three hours, they can be left in a social situation in a lunch room with no communication at all. As a deaf person, trying to mix with other students using a pen and paper was very difficult. That is not how deaf people usually communicate—we use sign language. In my experience, having no support there was not helpful.

DSA needs to be reviewed so that there is enough funding for enough interpreters to really support deaf people through the whole university experience. For me working as an employment adviser, access to work support is there to help people to do their jobs. People can be funded by up to £40,000 a year. In my role, I use interpreters for meetings and phone calls, for example. In university, the funding is around £20,000 a year or for 30 hours a week of interpreting. We need more interpreting in universities for deaf students.

Things such as social events are linked to that. I know that a lot of hearing people go to university because they want to learn, but they also want to have the social experience. They want to develop their social skills. Deaf people do not have the same opportunities.

I will give an example that involves freshers week and when I arrived at university as a new student. Members will know what that is like. There are two weeks of meeting people and getting used to the university experience. However, I found that my interpreters were funded only from day 1 of the course, so freshers week was a real lost opportunity for me. I arrived on the first day, and everybody was in their little groups and all sat together. They had made their friendships and bonds. I arrived for my first lecture,

and someone said, "Would you please pair up?" I had no one to pair up with, because I had not met anyone yet. It would be good for universities to look at social events such as freshers week, as university needs to be about more than just learning; it is about building confidence, socialising and learning together. That is an important issue.

I would love there to be more deaf staff who advise disabled students in universities. That would mean that they would have the empathy that was mentioned earlier. Currently, a lot of disabled students who have knowledge of using a wheelchair, having sight loss or being deaf go to university, but the staff do not have that experience. It would be very good for deaf students to have someone who is deaf to speak to at university. If universities could try to recruit or encourage more deaf staff or encourage disabled or deaf people who have degrees to come back and become lecturers or teachers, that would really add to the experience and attract more students. When they met deaf or disabled students, they would have real empathy, the full picture and the full information, and they would be able to offer really helpful advice.

The Convener: That is really helpful advice.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, everyone. I want to explore the topic of reasonable adjustments, which Lauren McDougall raised. Is assessment of what would be reasonable adjustments done at the application stage? Is the assessment process revisited regularly? The supports that are put in place at the beginning might not be the supports that the person will need on an on-going basis. Is there capacity to make changes to support packages and adjustments? How much dialogue is there between the person who requires the adjustments and the person who makes them?

The Convener: Rebecca Scarlett gave in her written evidence a lot of information on reasonable adjustment and how the process could be done. Perhaps you would be the best person to start answering Mary Fee's questions.

Rebecca Scarlett (Lead Scotland): I am not based in a university, but I know that each university has a different approach and different processes. There is capacity to review assessments and the arrangements that have been put in place. The big barrier is in students' ability to speak up and to say that something is not working, that something is difficult or that they need a change. I am not saying that there cannot be reassessment and that adjustments cannot be changed, but there is not constant dialogue and there is not a process in which a disabled student can access advice regularly. The onus is on the student to approach the university. If they have had a negative experience in the first instance and

have not had the right adjustments put in place, having to speak up for themselves to ask for more help when adjustments are not working is a real barrier. That is certainly the experience that is reflected by students who call our helpline.

Mary Fee: Should responsibility for starting the dialogue be with the institution that the student is attending rather than with the students themselves?

Rebecca Scarlett: Institutions should be more responsible for finding out how students are getting on and how adjustments are working. We sometimes hear on the helpline that it has come as a surprise to an academic tutor that a student has declared that they are disabled and has had an assessment. Tutors do not seem to be aware that there is a need for an adjustment to be put in place: there is a lack of communication.

There are many instances of students having difficulty with policies on matters such as absence levels. For example, a student might be off sick because of something related to their impairment, but the academic tutor asks them to leave without exploring why. According to the Equality Act 2010, policies must be adjusted. Even if policies are not directly discriminating against those students, it needs to be considered whether they are indirectly discriminating against them. There are situations in which academic tutors do not seem to be aware that there is an issue in the first place, and sometimes there is a lack of communication between the disability services and the academic staff.

Mary Fee: You have touched on the next question that I want to ask. Is there flexibility for students to say, for example, that they will be unable to do the set timetable for the next month or that they need more time to complete an assessment or piece of work.

Rebecca Scarlett: Absolutely there is that flexibility, but—again—it differs across the sector. One of the key concerns that we have picked up from people who are thinking about accessing university is about how they will manage if they do not go to university on a particular day. Not enough is being done to allow that kind of flexibility. I have, in the past couple of weeks, given advice to a number of students for whom such information was not put in their support plan, in the first place. There seems to be inconsistency in how it is communicated to academic staff when a student has said, during an appointment with a disability officer, that they will need that flexibility.

There is capacity for flexibility, but the amount of flexibility does not always meet needs—there is such a wide range of needs and there are different impairments. The set policies give a bit of flexibility, but they do not stretch beyond that and they do not work for some disabled students who have more complex health conditions.

Mary Fee: Does anyone else on the panel want to comment?

Dr Hutchison: I will add a little bit about flexibility. The standard seems to be that an extension of a week or a fortnight can often be negotiated, if students need that. In some situations students have been asked how long they need and told "We want to take the pressure off you, so forget about deadlines—we want to get you through this". However, cases that I have come across in which such flexibility has been offered have been few and far between. Perhaps there should be a compromise between open-ended deadlines and extensions of a week or, at best, a fortnight, so that there is a greater flexibility for a wider range of people.

Professor Graham Turner (Heriot-Watt University): I will pick up on the term "reasonable adjustments". We are talking about lots of microadjustments in particular instances, therefore the notion of what is reasonable is contextual. In the evidence that the committee heard last week, there was a lot of talk about the requirement for system-wide change, which would involve changing the whole context in which decisions are made. I wanted to draw attention to that.

We are talking about wicked—chronic, persistent and system-wide—issues. Therefore, problematising what we think of as a reasonable adjustment means stepping right back from the microadjustments in individual cases and asking what provision needs to be put in place not just in higher education, but throughout the education system and across the education experience. As Mark McMillan has said, this is not just about making adjustments in classrooms.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning, everybody. I want to take you all back to the very beginning of the process—trying to get into university or college through the application process. What barriers have you or students with whom you have come into contact experienced in trying to get into university?

I noticed in Rebecca Scarlett's submission the example of a person with a disability being refused entry to university. The university simply said that there was a "high level of competition", and disability markers and so on were not taken into account. Can each of you tell us about experience of difficulty in getting in the door in the first place?

The Convener: Christopher Wilde could come in at this point, given his experiences at the University of St Andrews.

Christopher Wilde (University of St Andrews Students Association): I will make two points

about admissions. First, we have found that students tend to admit to having a disability only once they have arrived at the university. They are concerned about marking on their UCAS form that they are disabled for fear that it might be detrimental to their application, although that is not the case as far as the university is concerned—it will make as many adjustments as are necessary. However, students fear that they may not be accepted by universities if they are seen as being disabled.

Another issue that has come up—this time from the university and not students—is British Sign Language using students. We do not have any students who require BSL interpreters, but there is significant concern in student support that there are not enough interpreters available if a BSL-using student were to come to the university. Mark McMillan said that there would be considerable difficulty in providing a student with the number of BSL interpreters that they would need in order for them to be at the university and to provide educational and social support. The university would have to look carefully at the application and how it would build a package around that need.

On applications, Lauren McDougall—rightly—talked about disabled students allowance. The assessment centres take about four to six months. We currently have two students waiting for support. That will probably take until next May—almost the time of the exams at the end of their first year. That will mean that they will have spent a year with practically no support. The university is giving as much support as it can, but the students require large laptops, for example, which the university does not have and cannot provide. It will take almost a year for the students to get funding and support, which is a huge challenge for them. Such situations are putting a lot of people off and are causing an awful lot of stress for people coming up to the exam period in the university who have had no support during their entire first semester. The university is trying to compensate for that, but there are limits to what it can do.

10:00

Rebecca Scarlett: As I said in my written submission about the application process, there is sometimes not enough opportunity to disclose information in support of an application. The committee will have seen what was said on contextual information by the commission on widening access, but it is not always possible for a disabled student to provide such information. Not everybody wants to overdisclose, and all that information to be taken into account, but there might be a reason why a person cannot relocate—for example, they cannot move from the city where they live because of the package of care and

support that they need, or they are unable to travel. If a student cannot go anywhere else in the country, that should be taken into consideration in decisions on whether to offer a place on a course to that student.

Professor Turner: We have discussed issues arising at the admission stage, that is already a bit late in the process for BSL-using students. The issues start much earlier for them—in respect of, for example, the aspiration to attend university in the first place. Recent evidence from the National Deaf Children's Society in Scotland shows that deaf students are still underrepresented in higher education, and that the attainment levels that would enable those students even to consider applying for university are not being encouraged. There is already a lot that universities could do to encourage that aspiration. For example, they could produce marketing and recruitment material in BSL that invites deaf students to say "Yeah—that's the university I want to identify with." The universities could run access programmes in the summer; that has been suggested previously and is a recommendation in "A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access". Summer programmes for BSL users to bridge the gap into higher education would be welcome.

I flag up the shortage of BSL interpreters as another indication that there is a system-wide problem. That is not a problem that higher education itself can resolve, because there is a country-wide shortage of BSL interpreters across all public services. If we were to set a target in the short term that every university in Scotland will be equally accessible to all BSL users, we would find that there is indeed the problem of a shortage of interpreters. We therefore need to set a series of targets over a period of time and to put in place building blocks that will enable us to build towards having that provision firmly across the board.

Mark McMillan: *(simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language)* To add to what Professor Turner said, there are a number of barriers for deaf students who want to attend university that are primarily to do with our first language not being English. If somebody's first language is British Sign Language, the information about the university and the support that is on offer there needs to be provided in BSL. I do not think that universities take enough responsibility on their websites or in other information to include information that would attract deaf students. They could easily embed on their websites information in BSL that would be useful and beneficial.

Again, even making contact with the universities is very difficult for a deaf, BSL-using potential student. They cannot simply make a phone call to somebody, for example, because they would need

somebody to interpret the phone call for them, and so on. The people on the receiving end often do not know how to handle that kind of call, so there are a number of problems just in that process.

If deaf students were aware that a university had other deaf students and some deaf staff, that university would be much more attractive to them and they would be much more likely to aspire to attend it. If those staff really engaged with the deaf community, and tried to attract them and get them interested in higher education, that would be really valuable.

Some universities are very good and proactive about considering applications and thinking about what needs to be done; others are not. Many deaf students have to take on the responsibility for organising their own communication support, booking their own interpreters and so on for all their courses. That is a massive responsibility and administrative load that other students do not have. It adds greatly to the stress that deaf students have at university and, as I say, gives them a much heavier workload.

Lauren McDougall: I support what Rebecca Scarlett said about contextual information. One of the biggest issues that we hear about from applicants is that they are unable to explain gaps in their education and employment. If that contextual information could be flagged up as an issue about widening access so that such applications could be considered under different criteria, students would feel a lot less anxious about trying to explain their applications. At the moment, the space for the personal statement is not very big and students need to fit into it why they have been out of education or employment, which does not leave a lot of space for the other things that they need to cram in. More space is needed for contextual information.

One of the biggest anxieties that we hear about from applicants is that they do not know what to expect. More and clearer advice is needed on the sorts of adjustments that will be made for them at university so that they will know what support is available to them and whether university is for them. At the moment, there seems to be quite a lot of secrecy about what support is available, so students really struggle to know what they can ask for. I do not think that the onus should be on the student to know, before they get to university, what support is available. A lot more robust pre-entry advice would help to alleviate applicants' anxiety.

The Convener: Do you want to come back in, Willie?

Willie Coffey: Yes. I want to stick with this mysterious contextual information that has to be supplied by students before they get in the door.

Rebecca Scarlett gave the example of a person who was more than qualified for the course. Are students with a disability reluctant to supply that information for fear that it may be used against them, or are they just not aware that they can trigger the widening access markers so that that information is, and must be, taken into account?

Rebecca Scarlett: The problem is that the information will not be taken into account. The widening access markers are not related to impairments or disabilities, so there needs to be a process that allows that.

Many students will be keen to disclose and to talk about the issues that they face and—as Lauren McDougall said—why there are gaps. Other students will be less keen because there is so much perceived fear about disclosure and the impact that it will have. At the moment, the ability to disclose is not necessarily an opportunity. The student whom I mentioned constantly tried to engage with the disability office to explain the non-linear, stretched-out process that she had been through, but the disability office refused to accept anything and said that disabled students' applications were treated the same as anybody else's and were not given preference. However, the Equality Act 2010 says that it is not illegal to treat disabled people more favourably. She had the minimum academic competencies, so the disability office could have taken that contextual information into account. We are not saying that entry requirements need to be lowered, because applicants may have the minimum academic competencies or more. However, the number of admissions that they can take from Scotland and the European Union is capped.

Dr Hutchison: One student in particular comes to my mind. A young woman who had completed an undergraduate degree course applied for postgraduate study, for which she had to attend an interview. Her application was declined: from her narration of that to me, I got the impression that the interviewer was seeing the disability and not the person. I might be doing that interviewer a disfavour—I do not know their identity, anyway—but that is the impression that I gained.

The student said to me afterwards, "It's obviously not to be." I asked whether she really wanted to do postgraduate study and she said that she would love to, so I suggested that we look for other options—different courses and different institutions. She was limited—in the way that Rebecca Scarlett highlighted—as regards where she could study, but there were options open to her. I am pleased to say that she applied for another course and got her postgraduate diploma. However, the opportunity was so nearly missed, and her fulfilment would have been inhibited as a result of that.

The Convener: We have heard a lot about the Equality Act 2010 this morning. Maybe Professor Turner could give us a wee bit of insight into the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 and the duties that it places on public bodies, including universities.

Professor Turner: I would be pleased to do that.

The Convener: I thought so. [*Laughter*.]

Professor Turner: Parliament achieved something quite remarkable last year in the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015. Part of what is remarkable about it is not only that it is couched in terms of ensuring access for BSL users to wider society, but that the headline terminology is that we will

"promote the use and understanding of British Sign Language".

In the context that we are talking about today, there are a wide range of really exciting things that we could do in higher education and throughout the education system to promote use of BSL. For example, we have just been talking about application processes. How about enabling BSL users to apply to university in BSL? That seems to me to be a nice way to promote use of BSL, but it would also completely change entirely the terms on which the interaction takes place. It would give people an opportunity to say not what they will take from the university or what they need from it, but what they will bring to the university. That kind of systemic shift in thinking is exactly what the 2015 act is trying to nurture right across the country.

The Convener: Thank you.

Mary—is your question a supplementary to that?

Mary Fee: No. It is on a different subject.

The Convener: Right. We will have Jeremy Balfour's questions next.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): Good morning again and thank you very much for coming. I have three questions, but before I ask them, I want to thank Mark McMillan in particular for his statement. The whole issue of what happens outside the course, in freshers week, in the evening at the union or wherever is really important, and it is something that we need to go away and reflect on. I am not asking a question on that, but I did not want to lose the importance of what he said.

My first question—I am happy for anyone to jump in and answer this—is about our use of the term "disability". It is a wide term that can refer to physical disabilities, learning difficulties or mental health issues. In your experience, is there a

hierarchy? Do people who have a certain disability get a better experience than people who have other disabilities? Are universities better set up for some disabilities than for others, or is it a pretty standard thing?

The Convener: Christopher, I am reflecting on the evidence that you gave a while ago about certain pieces of equipment not being available at St Andrews, and maybe BSL not being available there. Will you answer the question and then elaborate a bit on what is available?

Christopher Wilde: Certainly. BSL students would be welcome at St Andrews. The issue is just the lack of available interpreters. The university would try to support students as much as it could.

I was asked to come to Parliament only last week, and this is not my direct area of expertise, so I have been speaking to students over the past week about their experiences. What I have generally found is that, once support is in place, that support seems to be working quite well. There are some issues to do with staff not always being informed, as one of the panel members mentioned earlier, and staff education is something that the students association is going to look at, but most students find that, once support is in place, it seems to work well for them and be quite acceptable. Mary Fee asked about how alterations could be made once support was in place, and it seems to be very easy. The university seems to provide a lot of support and the students seem to be happy with that.

10:15

There does not seem to be a hierarchy of help for disabilities. That is the experience at our university, but I do not know about others. However, the number of people with different disabilities is changing. Mental health, for example, is becoming a much bigger issue. We had 12 students who were registered with a mental health disability in 2009, and there are now 320. That has come about in part because we have been educating the students. We now have a mental health week, and we had a masculinity and mental health event last night, and such events are improving the situation. Once support is in place and once the disabled student allowance comes in, or if a student does not require that and there is a learning plan in place from the outset, that seems to be working pretty well generally for the students at our university.

Lauren McDougall: I am not sure whether there is a hierarchy, but there are certain difficulties that are more common or for which it is much easier to put support in place, because there is already a clear pathway for how the support is to be put in place. At the University of Glasgow,

the disability service has seen a rise in students registering with mental health problems and students with long-term, chronic health issues, which pose more difficulty when providing reasonable adjustments, because they tend to be a lot more individualised. There is not necessarily a hierarchy, but there are students whose support is put in place more quickly because it is much more standard and there is already a protocol stating what they will get, whereas students who have more complex needs may find that there is more difficulty or there are longer waiting lists, and there may not be as much information about the support that is available, particularly with mental health issues.

Across the sector, counselling and psychological services are chronically underfunded, and students with long-term mental health conditions often find that their general practitioner will wash their hands of them and say, "This is your university's responsibility," even though waiting lists can be months long. It can cause a lot of problems. With the non-medical personal help part of DSA, some students get mentoring support that falls under mental health and counselling support, but it is not consistent. If students with long-term mental health conditions were able to access more long-term support under that part of DSA, particularly as mental health impacts on their studies in relevant ways, that would alleviate some of the stress on counselling and psychological services at universities and would leave those services more open to the short-term needs of other students. That is certainly something that could be looked into.

Professor Turner: As I am sure Mark McMillan will agree, no university in Scotland has made itself a magnet for deaf, BSL-using students. There are universities south of the border to which BSL users will go in preference to any Scottish university, because none of the Scottish universities has flown a flag to say, "We really understand what it means to make our university accessible to BSL users." There is a severe chicken-and-egg problem there. The students are smart enough not to go to a university that has no reputation for providing proper support, and there are too many experiences that we could all point to where universities have said that they will put provision in place when a student arrives, but when the student arrives the university turns out not to know the difference between a level 1 BSL user, which is low, and a level 6 BSL user, which is high. Instead, it may invert the thing and provide a service that is not effective at all. That goes back to my point about what we mean by "reasonable adjustment".

Mark McMillan: (*simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language*) That is why we need to involve deaf professionals more in universities,

because they have first-hand experience of deafness and BSL and they can put in place the appropriate support.

At present, there is very much a pan-disability approach. In our employment service, the employment advice is pan-disability and universities, too, have a pan-disability approach. I feel that that has a negative effect on access for deaf people. The pan-disability approach can be good, but a lot of the time there is not enough focus on the needs of individuals and of deaf people. I feel strongly that we need someone who has experience of being deaf and of using interpreters so that the appropriate support can be put in place.

Deaf people have an extra issue in that a lot of us do not view ourselves as disabled. We feel that we are a cultural and linguistic minority rather than a disability group, which presents more of a barrier to accessing university because it raises a language access issue rather than a disability issue. We need to look at and improve language access for deaf people, rather than seeing access purely as a disability issue, and we need to provide language support professionals in universities who understand that.

Dr Hutchison: With regard to the notion of whether there is a hierarchy, it is worth flagging up that there are many students who have more than one disability. Individual needs are often very individual and complex; we might have a student with a mobility issue who also has problems with articulation, or a deafblind student. Quite often, for students with a sensory or physical impairment, the challenges that they experience in coping with such an impairment might have an impact on their mental health, particularly on arrival at university. That adds another aspect to the overall problems and needs that must be addressed.

The Convener: In this inquiry, we are finding out how many layers there are when it comes to supporting people properly.

Jeremy Balfour: Dr Hutchison, I appreciate that you are not speaking today from a Disability History Scotland perspective, but I wonder whether you can provide some historical context. Last night, at a reception, I was talking to a lady whose view was that, in practice, things have moved on very little since the late 1970s and 1980s. We have passed a lot of legislation and put a lot of procedures in place, but the experience for a disabled person at university today may not be that different from the experience of someone who went to university—I must be careful, as the 1980s do not seem that long ago—in the 1980s.

Dr Hutchison: There have been gradual improvements over time. You might want to google the name "Fred Reid"—he is a blind

gentleman who was discouraged from going into higher education when he was a young man in the 1950s. He succeeded, against all the advice that he was given not to raise his sights too high.

There have certainly been improvements, but the difficulties still exist. In higher education and a lot of other spheres, the difficulties that people with various impairments encounter come down to issues of education, understanding and empathy among the able-bodied people with whom they are interacting. Those problems still exist—perhaps not to the extent that they did 100 years ago or even 50 years ago, but they are still there. We are told that 20 per cent of the population in Scotland identify as having a disability, so we should be much more aware of individuals' different needs and aspirations and the different problems that they encounter, and see them as people rather than as just a disability.

Jeremy Balfour: My final question is for Christopher Wilde. I appreciate that you are here to represent not the university but the students association. I was talking to my nephew, who graduated from the University of St Andrews last year, and my niece, who is a first-year student at St Andrews, and I told them that St Andrews does not have the best record for disabled students. Their immediate response was to question how the adaptations could be made to such historic buildings. Do you think that some of the old universities, such as St Andrews, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, use that as an excuse? When we talk about making reasonable adaptations, do they say that, because they cannot adjust an 18th or 19th century building, they will not do anything at all? Do the historic universities use that as an excuse? How do we get past that excuse, particularly for those who have access issues and other issues with accommodation and lecture halls?

The Convener: We will understand if you find aspects of that question difficult to answer.

Christopher Wilde: Some students have certainly had problems in gaining access to buildings. For example, some buildings at St Andrews can be problematic for people who have issues with fatigue. We had a student with ME who was asked to go to a tutorial that was in a room five storeys up, and they said that that was not possible for them. Some buildings are simply not accessible.

However, almost all the buildings are accessible on some level. For example, our psychology building is inaccessible—if someone is in a wheelchair, they cannot get into the building; there are no two ways about it—but there is another building with rooms in it 100 yards down the road, and the university tends to move whole tutorials there. If the university is aware of a disability or a mobility issue that prevents someone from accessing any of the buildings, it will move their tutorial or class to another building.

There have been challenges with staff. A student who left the university and is now studying for a postgrad at Edinburgh had challenges in getting up to a tutorial on the fifth floor of a building but was told, "We've been in this room for the past 15 years and we're not moving now." The university got involved and eventually managed to deal with the situation, but it took about eight or nine weeks.

There is no doubt that we can accommodate students who have problems with buildings being inaccessible, because we have alternatives, but there are still issues with how much staff will try to adjust. You asked about reasonable adjustments, and striking a balance between how much the staff want to move and how much our student services department wants them to move can be quite challenging. We are working on that.

Dr Hutchison: I can give the student perspective on that. I had one student who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis during the course of her study. It was having a mental impact on her, and the impact on her physical condition seemed to be quite progressive. One day, she came to see me—I did not know that she was coming to see me, and I was in a garret on the fourth floor of a traditional university building. I was horrified that she had struggled up four flights of stairs, but her response was that, although it took her a wee while and it was a bit painful, she did not want to make an issue of it. The student was placed in discomfort, and that should not have occurred.

Rebecca Scarlett: I would like to add to that the case of a student who was trying to access a particular school of an ancient university. She was a wheelchair user. Although, on the outside, it looked as though there had been a lot of adjustments and that the school was accessible, when she tried to access it she could not—the button to open the doors was broken and there was nobody available to help, and the lecture theatre was not accessible. She immediately wrote that school off, but there was nowhere else in the city she could go. I advocated on her behalf, and the university said that it would do everything that it could to relocate her classes. As you say, it takes someone intervening for the student to find that out, and a lot of the time they will be put off before they get to that stage. They will not take the matter any further because they do not want the inconvenience or to have to push for access. Access to the buildings is not mainstreamed or inclusive enough, but there are things that the ancient universities will do.

The Convener: Do you think that there should be a much more pre-emptive attitude?

Rebecca Scarlett: Absolutely.

The Convener: It should have been simple to fix a broken button to ensure that the doors operated.

Rebecca Scarlett: Definitely. It is a requirement of the Equality Act 2010 that education providers anticipate a range of different needs, including those of students with a range of impairments. Often, however, what is done is reactive and things happen in response to something having gone wrong rather than as a result of people thinking about what can be done in advance.

10:30

Lauren McDougall: Sometimes the onus is put on the students. Perhaps the timetable will allocate a room without considering whether there is anybody in the class who has physical accessibility issues, and it is not until a student tries to access that teaching space that they realise that it is inaccessible. By that point it is already the start of the semester, which causes problems because the class has to be relocated. There needs to be more provision before classes and timetables are booked to indicate whether there are students with physical accessibility needs. That goes back to the whole issue of students not being able to register with physical disability services in time, which means that departments do not have that information in time and are not able to timetable classes in the right way.

One of the other issues with physical accessibility, which people tend to forget, is that some of the campuses are very large and students may be trying to get from one end of the campus to the other in the 10 minutes between classes. If they have any sort of mobility needs at all, that can be very difficult.

It is those kinds of minute issues that get overlooked because they are not as obvious as ramped entry or push-button doors. They are a bit more abstract and people tend to forget about them, and it is not until students highlight them when they are at the university that anything can be done about them. There needs to be more pre-emptive thought about those wider issues.

The Convener: We keep coming back to the application process and even earlier than that—maybe to when students are thinking about universities, before they make their Universities and Colleges Admissions Service application.

Mark McMillan: (*simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language*) We need to remember that physical disability and physical barriers are not the only barriers that we encounter. There are attitudinal barriers, which can be as big as or worse than the physical barriers that we experience.

My experience is shared with a lot of other students. In lectures we may ask lecturers whether it is possible to have a short break because we have only one interpreter working and it is very hard to focus on an interpreter. We cannot write notes at the same time—we are really focused on the interpreter and the language. The lecturers may say no, they will not adapt their teaching to accommodate me as a student in the class, or they may say yes, they will break after 30 minutes or so, but then they forget.

Those kinds of attitudinal barriers need to be addressed. For example, providing university staff with deaf awareness training before a deaf student starts studying at the university would be hugely beneficial, not just for the staff but for the students who will be in those situations with the deaf student. It would be really beneficial for all the people who will engage at all with that deaf student to be given deaf awareness training. If we think of group activities that are done with other students, such as preparing presentations, it would make an enormous amount of difference for the interpreter's ability to engage with that sort of activity with the deaf student if the other students also had some awareness of the issues involved.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): Good morning, everyone. I thank Mark McMillan for the insight that he has given us into his experience as a student; I was struck in particular by his initial testimony about his experience of things like freshers week. Jeremy Balfour touched on that, too.

The student experience is something that universities seek to market; it is not just the course or the quality of the qualifications that they can offer, but the student experience. From visiting a number of universities, I know that it was the feel, the vibe and the social side of things that swung my choice—notwithstanding that the other universities would not have me. That student experience is absolutely key. I met my best man in freshers week and lots of things happened to me outside in the margins of university that shaped me as a person.

It really struck me when Mark McMillan said that the support he gets as a student starts and ends with lectures. Picking up on Professor Turner's comment that no university in Scotland has cracked this issue, can you give us any examples of universities either in the British Isles or overseas that have bridged that gap and opened up the wider aspects of the student experience? How have they done that?

Mark McMillan: *(simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language)* The University of Central Lancashire in Preston has attracted a number of deaf students, because it has a number of members of staff who are deaf and all the staff are obviously deaf aware. Those deaf graduates inform the deaf community and so on in a kind of knock-on or domino effect.

Going back to the earlier point about freshers week, because the university has a number of deaf students and staff, new deaf students can go along to freshers week in the knowledge that there will be other deaf people who can engage with and support them. That makes a massive difference not only in that respect but in their being able to socialise with hearing peers. It also has benefits for hearing students, who have an opportunity to mix with a large number of deaf students. Indeed, there are benefits all round.

Professor Turner: I was at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston for 10 years before I came up to Edinburgh. Its experience of working with deaf students has been put into book form, so the knowledge is there and available to any university in Scotland to pick up. When I arrived at Heriot-Watt University, I thought that there was an opportunity for a Scottish university to emulate that kind of provision, but at that point 10 years ago, I could not make any headway.

Ten years down the line, we have something like 25 BSL users on the staff, doing PhDs and so on, and we are doing a lot of work with the institution and saying, "Okay, now's the time to take an institution-wide approach." I reinforce Mark McMillan's comment that we really need a whole-institution approach; it is just not enough to say, "We'll bring in a few specialists here and there, and they'll fix the curriculum for us."

Lauren McDougall: On the need for an institutional approach, I point out that at the moment it falls upon student bodies to help make freshers week and social life more inclusive. This year, at Glasgow university we trialled a brand-new freshers helper team with the aim of widening participation among non-traditional students, disabled students, mature students, care leavers and so on. The team was targeted at those students—for example, we went with access students to events that had been marketed through the disability service—and at our welfare and social events we saw a higher uptake from a much wider student demographic than we have ever seen.

However, although that is great, we need these things to come from higher up and a wider institutional approach to be taken. It took just a few of us in the student union to decide that we were going to do that, but we need the approach to come from higher up to ensure that students are

aware that the university wants them to be there and to play a full part in the student experience. Peer support should not be understated—indeed, so many students who drop out cite isolation as the key cause—but we must ensure that it is not up to individual students on a council or union to include those students.

Rebecca Scarlett: We receive quite a lot of calls to the helpline from autistic students—or their parents—telling us about the anxiety that they are experiencing about their upcoming transition to university. The social side of things can be a difficult barrier for them. Although they might cope well with the academic side, someone with autism can find it difficult to make the transition. Glasgow Caledonian University has a really good summer programme in which a particular cohort of students are introduced to and shown around the campus and, as a result, they already know people when they start at the university after the summer. I would like to see a lot more of that activity scaled up across universities, because I am not aware of many other summer transition programmes like that.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: My second and final question is about attrition. We have heard a lot about getting on to courses and students' learning experience. I asked the same question last week, but as someone who was on sabbatical as a member of the university court in Aberdeen 10, 15 or 20 years ago—at any rate, it was a long time ago—I know that, at that time, when a student wanted an exit form from the admissions department in order to leave the course and the university, there was no mechanism to capture why they were leaving or to try to mitigate their reasons for leaving. That was particularly compounded for students with disabilities.

I would like to hear reflections on where we are now and what mechanisms are in place so that, if students with disabilities in particular decide that they have had enough, there is support to try to re-engage them and stop them leaving.

Rebecca Scarlett: I am not aware of any particular mechanisms that are in place, but things could be different in different institutions. I have supported a lot of people on the helpline who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out for reasons that are related to their impairment, and there is no process or mechanism for that. Just yesterday, someone who had been on interrupted study leave due to a mental health problem called the helpline. Because they did not fully understand the process, they were not engaged with it. They did not provide the right evidence, and they have now been excluded because there was a lack of engagement and a lack of a system approach to finding out how support could be put in place. We have certainly had that experience on the helpline.

However, different things might be happening in different institutions.

Lauren McDougall: As far as I am aware, at the University of Glasgow reasons are recorded for people leaving their course, but there is not necessarily intervention to try to mitigate those reasons. Disabled students often leave the university because of a lack of flexibility. If a person finished one semester and became ill in the second semester, there is not a lot of scope to restart at that point in the next year. They would either have to take the whole year out or finish the year. There is a lack of flexibility to switch from full-time study to part-time study, and there is the issue of the maximum time to get a degree. That time is different in different universities, but there is always a maximum. That means that there is often a time pressure to finish the degree if the person had to take time out for health reasons. That is a lot of pressure, and many students just think that they would be better off leaving than being put under that intense scrutiny.

Lack of flexibility on deadlines and extensions is a massive issue. At the University of Glasgow, for example, if a person requires an extension of more than three days, that is not granted in advance. They have to submit evidence for a good cause, and they will not be told whether that has been accepted until after the deadline. Therefore, students are left with a lot of anxiety. They have to decide whether they trust the system enough that the extension will be accepted before they miss the deadline. Many students find that the process is too prescriptive and that, rather than have to deal with the anxiety that comes with that, they are better off just dropping out. That is really sad, because the system should be much more supportive. A person should not be forced to choose between their health and their education.

Rebecca Scarlett: That is a key example of an inflexible policy that indirectly discriminates against students. Such policies do not overtly or intentionally discriminate, but the three-day policy cannot be applied to everybody. Consideration needs to be given to how that will impact on students with complex health conditions, especially fluctuating ones. They do not know how they will be affected.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Lauren McDougall said that the University of Glasgow captures reasons why students leave or the numbers of students who leave. It would be very useful if the committee could be furnished with the metrics of not just the University of Glasgow but every university in Scotland so that we can get a picture of the attrition of students with disabilities in particular, find out where the hotspots are, and perhaps interrogate the information further to see whether

there are mechanisms that universities deploy to try to catch students before they leave.

The Convener: Yes. I think that that can be done. Last week, we heard that some lecturers do not realise that people are having difficulties until they just do not turn up. That information is difficult to capture, as those people cannot be pinned down to find out why they did not turn up.

Dr Hutchison: Dropping out or leaving is one response, but it is not the only response. Other outcomes are self-harm and suicide. They happen in a small minority of cases, but we really have to tackle that.

10:45

Professor Turner: The issue of the quality of evidence that is available is pertinent, but there is also a much broader question about what the evidence base is across all those issues. It seems to me that, both for BSL users and for disabled students across the board, there are a number of tests that we might want to apply—for example, whether we are actually thinking system wide, across the board, and whether the provision that is being put in place is of suitable quality.

We talk a lot about making provision, but we do not ask very much about the quality of that provision. Is it experienced as effective provision by the students in question? Is it efficient in the sense that they are not the ones who have to make all the adjustments and all the phone calls to find interpreters and so on, as Mark McMillan said? Lastly, are we doing more than simply creating access and thinking about what it means to promote BSL use and to promote disabled people's experiences as a social good?

Christopher Wilde: I would like to add the experiences of St Andrews students in response to Alex Cole-Hamilton's question. We have an academic alert system whereby, if a student misses a deadline or is not attending classes—for many departments, classes are almost all compulsory—that is flagged up.

Just this year, we introduced a new academic alert system in which someone from our student support service is the first person a student receives contact from. If someone misses lectures or tutorials, they get an email from our student support service, saying, "We know that you've missed a couple of things. Is everything okay? How are you doing?". The student can then get back in contact with the student support service or with other people.

I had a long-term health issue and I contacted my school to say that I would not be able to attend a tutorial because I had to go and see my doctor. Two days later, I got an email from the people at

the student support service, asking me to register my health issue with them so that they could support me with that. That has been quite helpful.

We have a flexible deadline system so that, if a student has an issue and they get a plan set up, we can have extendable deadlines that then apply throughout their university life.

Thirdly, if a student registers with a disability through their UCAS application, they receive an email twice a year asking them whether they are still okay without any support for their disability or whether they would like the university to step in and give them some support. Two students have taken that up in their second and third years—not necessarily right from the outset—when they have thought, "I was okay up till now but, now that I have this email, yes, I could do with some support."

Our support networks seem to be working fairly well. We also record students' reasons for leaving. One last thing is that we also have a student-led service called Nightline, which is available every evening from, I think, about 8 o'clock until 7 in the morning. If students need support or help with anything, they can phone that number free of charge and get in touch with students who are trained to deal with issues and who will speak to them confidentially. That has been quite effective for us.

The Convener: Thank you.

Mark McMillan: *(simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language)* Support services like that are very often inaccessible for deaf people. Obviously, they cannot phone a helpline service, so they would be left without support for issues such as mental health, stress, anxiety and exams. As good as a lot of those services are, they are not accessible for deaf people.

The Convener: That is a point well made.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): We are now in December, and we were told that we would have a commissioner for widening access. What do you see that role being? What should we be aiming for from it? [*Interruption.*] Anyone? [*Laughter.*]

The Convener: You have just stunned them into silence.

Lauren McDougall: For me, it is really important that the term "widening access" is given a very broad scope. Until now, a lot of the focus in terms of widening access has been on the most deprived postcode areas or on particular schools, but not necessarily on disabled people or adult returners. We need to take a very broad view of widening access, so that, as we said earlier, certain things are flagged up as widening access issues on a UCAS form, which does not happen at the moment.

We need somebody who takes a broad view of widening access and takes into consideration all the issues that intersect with one another. For example, it is not just that a person is from one of the most deprived postcode areas; they may also be disabled and an adult returner. Those all bring with them their own complex issues. We need to take a wide and intersectional view of widening access.

Rebecca Scarlett: The commission understood the limits of its remit and the report was about people from deprived areas or those who are care experienced. However, one recommendation highlighted the need for more focus on other protected characteristic groups. I would like to see the commissioner delve further into what support is available at university, carry out more in-depth research into that and review it across the board.

The report includes lots of recommendations that are specific to people from deprived backgrounds or who are care experienced. I would like to see some of those recommendations extended to disabled people. Some of them would naturally be of benefit to disabled people, but some of them are specific and say that people must meet criteria in terms of deprivation or care experience. We would therefore like to see some of them extended to disabled people—perhaps those from specific impairment groups, given the barriers that they face.

Professor Turner: The first recommendation in "A Blueprint for Fairness" is on creating the role of the commissioner and is a good one. The first bullet point reinforces the point, as it talks about leading

"cohesive and system wide efforts".

That is the key, top-line issue.

The Convener: We are out of time—and I am also thinking about our signers. Mary Fee has a very quick supplementary.

Mary Fee: It is not a supplementary; it is a separate issue.

The Convener: Be quick.

Mary Fee: I will be. It would be useful to get the panel's views on the disabled students allowance. The submissions quite clearly lay out the problems and issues with access to the allowance. I am keen to hear views on what can be done practically to streamline the process of applying for the allowance. Is there anything that universities can do to bridge the gap between application and receipt of the allowance? Are there any changes that you would like to see to the criteria? The benchmark seems particularly onerous. What changes would you like to see to that?

The Convener: Christopher Wilde was nodding away.

Christopher Wilde: I do not know much about the criteria, but my answer is that there could be something like a passport, with people being assessed before they enter higher education, whether they come from school, college or wherever, to establish their requirements. That information could be taken to the institution, rather than their having to wait until they get to the institution before applying for the allowance and having to wait. Having the assessment first—before someone even gets an offer of acceptance—would be beneficial.

Lauren McDougall: I agree entirely. If there were a sector-wide guideline for DSA, we would be able to assess people much earlier and would know the exact information that every institution required, and the process would be much more streamlined.

On changes to the criteria, I would definitely like to see a widening of what falls under non-medical personal help. At the moment, that criterion is not applied in the same way at every institution. If we could widen what students could access through the fund, we could better support students with long-term mental health problems or sensory impairments.

The Convener: Mark McMillan has told us about some of the challenges around having enough finance for interpreters and being able to apply to universities using BSL. Is there anything else that we should be looking at, Mark?

Mark McMillan: (*simultaneous interpretation from British Sign Language*) In connection with DSA, it would be really useful for deaf students in need of interpreting support to deal with advisers who are deaf and have experience of the support that the students would need or benefit from. It is not as simple as saying, "You perhaps need an interpreter." It is about thinking about the type of course that the student is applying for and what support is appropriate, which will depend on course design, the terminology involved and so on, and then finding appropriate interpreters if they are required. It would be hugely beneficial to have knowledgeable advisers engaging in that process and negotiating what is required with the student.

Rebecca Scarlett: The criteria cause a massive problem because part-time students are not able to access DSA. There is a strange, counter-productive rule on the minimum amount of credits that a person needs to study, or the minimum amount of time for which they need to study, to access the allowance. In particular, those on distance learning or Open University courses, who may have complex health conditions and who may be doing their higher education courses over a long period, cannot access DSA. There does not seem to be any clear policy rationale for why that is the case.

The Convener: That is an excellent point on which to finish. We have much more work to do in looking at the issue, and we have other organisations coming in next week to provide evidence.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the panellists very much for their evidence. It has been informative and enlightening and has given us clear areas to focus on. We are grateful to you for that.

If, after the meeting, you think of something that you should have told us, please get back in touch. We would be happy to hear from you all again during the work that we are doing.

10:56

Meeting continued in private until 11:16.

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