OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 25 January 2017

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 25 January 2017

CONTENTS

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
3rd Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)
*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Maureen McKenna (Commission on Widening Access)
Professor Peter Scott (Commissioner for Fair Access)
Dame Ruth Silver (Commission on Widening Access)
Professor Petra Wend (Commission on Widening Access)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 25 January 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning and welcome to the third meeting in 2017 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone present—including me—to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting. We have received apologies from Richard Lochhead.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take in item 5, which is consideration of our work programme, in private. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Commission on Widening Access

10:00

The Convener: Item 2 is an evidence-taking session with the commission on widening access. I welcome to the meeting three of the commission members: Dame Ruth Silver, chair of the commission; Maureen McKenna, executive director of education services, Glasgow City Council; and Professor Petra Wend, principal and vice-chancellor, Queen Margaret University.

Dame Ruth, I understand that you have agreed to make an opening statement outlining the commission's work.

Dame Ruth Silver (Commission on Widening Access): Thank you very much. I am delighted to be here; indeed, I have been longing to come before the committee and open up this swiftly written, slightly dense but, I think, very crucial report. We had 10 months to do it, and my colleagues were incredibly industrious and supportive.

If it is okay, I want to start by telling you what we found at the end of our investigations that led us to make our recommendations. We literally scurried around the whole of Scotland; people were generous and hospitable on the visits that all or some of us made, and others came to see us from far-flung parts of Scotland to give us their thoughts about and experience of access. Our conclusion—and this is a headline conclusion, but I am happy to go into it in more detail if it suits—is that Scotland actually knows how to do this very well; however, things are at a difficult developmental stage.

The work that we came across was inspiring in some cases, innovative in many institutions and based on dedication. My own personal and professional standpoint is that access work is, like physics and other things, a specialism in its own right. Pedagogy and staff development are important, and the portability of the experience via credentials is crucial.

At the moment, the state of this work is exciting in some parts, very frail in some and stale in others. I can say that, because I went on every visit and saw everyone. It is all heavily dependent on inspired individuals who really believe in the cause of access; it is institutionally based, which means that practice in one institution, which might be terrific, is very different from practice down the road; practice is sometimes duplicated; and sometimes the portability between neighbouring institutions is not quite right. On the whole, the deficit is placed on the individual learner instead of

on institutional behaviours, but the good news is that there is a decade of terrific professional practice in access work and there are layers of good professionals who just need to be pulled together into an overall framework.

That is the state of what we looked at. I should remind the committee that we decided to have an appreciative inquiry, and part of our remit was to see what worked and what good practice could be taken further.

I am sorry that we wrote you such a long report—we just did not have the time to write you a short one. It really is as simple as that. I am glad to be here today to open up the report a bit with the help of my colleagues, who have already been introduced. I think that the timing is terrific, given that we are ready to move forward with the report with the appointment of Professor Scott.

I want to trail back a bit to the origins of the commission, which can be found in a statement by the First Minister. She said that she wanted us to

"determine ... that a child born today"

in difficult circumstances will have equal access to university as a child born in better circumstances. The use of the verb "determine" was inspiring and very cohesive for the commission.

That gave us a good lifespan. We worked with an imagined horizon of 2030, and the time was chunked into three five-year plans. The development stages were different. The first stage was about gathering together good practice and shaking it about to see what was good enough, what was not good enough and what needed to be removed. We then moved forward according to the agenda that we set out in our 34 recommendations.

Twelve good people joined me around the table, and the first thing that we did was induct one another. It was very important to work with the civil servants to get the kind of commission that I thought was needed to give a 360-degree look at access—not just access to education but access onwards to economic life. We also wanted to reflect employer views and so on, and we were able to find 12 people who were there in their own independent, professional right but who also represented the subsystems of the work on access—schools, universities, skills development and so on, the care community, the students and the staff.

In our induction phase, we worked on the philosophy of the commission. I will say it, because it is really important. There were many accusations in the press about social engineering and so on, but our philosophy is simple: work on access to education is about fairness and a belief in academic excellence for all as a social and economic good for the nation. Our five working principles were that our work would be systemic, appreciative, analytic, evidence based and collaborative.

With the remit of the commission having been established, the commission members inducted and representing something systemic, and a philosophy and organising principles agreed, we launched a call for evidence over the summer and commissioned research from the universities on a pro bono basis to look at what was going on in access in Scotland. We established a working process and met monthly. There were themed meetings, we had many visitors come to talk to us from the different subsystems, such as students and care specialists, and we made many visits, including to some very cold parts of Scotland on wet evenings when we had to wait for trains at stations. All of us were also available to talk at events, and I was heartened by the number of invitations that we got from membership bodies and representative bodies including trade unions and the professional unions.

I asked one thing of the commission members: that each of them steward an interest on the agenda. We had people working on different parts of it—for example, we looked at the Scottish index of multiple deprivation with joint working parties, at admissions and so on—and there was always a steward available to talk to and to explain things to colleagues. Indeed, the induction was our own members telling us what was going on.

We set up a number of specialist groups, which I will say more about, for the sake of the commissioner. The idea was always that we would have specialist groups to advise us, whose members would not be commission members but be people in the field from a mix of sectors. We wanted to leave scaffolding for the future, so that, when the commissioner is appointed, there will be groups that have explored the themes and the working papers will exist, although they have not been published in hard copy. We wanted a dowry of something to pass on in a spirit of generativity. There would also be the interim and final reports and then the handover.

The stance that we took as we did the work was simple: inequality is damaging, unsustainable and unfair, and it is time that it stopped. The work process took 10 months, and our organising principles were that the commissioners would be independent, specialist and linked backwards from our table into their own areas of work and institutions. As I said, we tried to create the system around the table. We had arguments and were unable to resolve some of them—for some of them, that will take a while and the timescale was very short indeed—but, as the chair, I tried to prevent those arguments from becoming personal

and to keep them as issues between the subsystems, staying curious the whole time.

As I have said, we were delighted that in Scotland you have terrific professionals and practice on some groundbreaking systems. The systems that are here, I have not seen the like of anywhere. However, they are within institutions and, modest as institutions are, they do not get talked about much elsewhere. That has to stop.

More than anything else, there is sincerity of intent. The problem is that the systems are not all the same and not all connected. Some of them need refreshing.

The conclusion was that, as innovative as things are in Scotland, they are idiosyncratic. That needs to change. There is a focus on the individual's deficit and the territory of institutions. There were cities where I saw three summer schools. It could have been wonderful, and they could have had young people meeting people who were different from them. It is unsystemic. It is an easy move from institution to systemic in planning terms, although of course it takes time.

There is a lack of portability in the system. I also think that our data is poor to inadequate. It is very hard to use because of the way it is organised, and that is a big issue that needs to be picked up soon.

Scotland also has untapped gifts. I am thinking of the Open University, where deputy headteachers were able to find units on philosophy for students from very difficult areas. They would present those to universities and get the credit for them. There is some smashing defiance in your institutions.

The strategic shift that Scotland needs to make is clear to me. It is from individual passions to institutional change. It is from institutions to a system in which they work together, with place as the focus of that. People working together and institutions working together are better at getting lots of bang for bucks.

I know that our report has a lot of recommendations, and I have explained why. They can be put into three very helpful categories. We talked about the leadership of the system change, including political leadership. We said that access is about learning—not about funding or cutting deals but about how you manage teaching, learning and assessment in institutions, so that they actually show the people for the talents they have. It is also about finding the places of leverage.

There were 34 recommendations. Not all of them are equal, in my view, but there are eight foundation recommendations, and I will say what they are. Recommendation 1 is on a commissioner for fair access and the leadership for the change; that has been taken care of.

Recommendation 2 is about the framework for fair access. If this is not about learning—if it is not about what is being taught and assessed and is portable—it is not going to work. Learning needs to be looked at and pruned and supported. Recommendation 3 is about funding being congruent with the framework for fair access. In time, we should not support work that is not leading anywhere for the learners.

Recommendation 11 is that there should be access thresholds that are ambitious and separate, because learners present from very different routes and have had very different opportunities. We are clear about that. We are very aware of the disputes on the issue but, nevertheless, the view of the commission was that they should go forward. The thresholds and contextual admissions are important, and that is why they need to be known, published and acted on.

We were delighted with the instant response from Government on a few of the recommendations, but particularly on the one on people with a care experience. The non-refundable bursary for care-experienced learners is crucial as well.

The targets need to be worked out in line with the development sense of the five-year plan.

All the other 26 recommendations have three intentions: to strengthen the work that needs to be done, to support the work that needs to be done, and to stretch the findings into all the institutions that are involved in access.

I know that we are going to talk about priorities going forward; I will leave that for my colleagues to contribute on. I hope that what I have said opens up for you some of our thinking during the 10 months—some of our ways of working and the things that we believed in. I am very happy to open up and take questions, along with my colleagues.

10:15

The Convener: Thank you very much. I am always delighted to hear somebody saying that they were really looking forward to coming before the committee.

I have a question that is based on comments that you made previously. It appears obvious to me that you were right when you said that it simply cannot be the case that the large majority of Scotland's best talent happens to reside in our most affluent areas. What evidence is there to show that the bright pupils from depressed areas can do just as well as or better than their more

affluent peers, even if their qualifications are not as good?

Dame Ruth Silver: I do not have the references to hand but, according to the report from the Sutton Trust, some of the work that was done in Scotland shows that, when young people who come from a disadvantaged background, including disadvantaged school backgrounds, are treated, taught and assessed in the company of others on the same course, they do very well indeed. There is evidence, although there is not enough, and we need more of it. The sense of the five-year plan is to start to establish the basis for that.

The Convener: My colleagues have questions about data and so on, but I have one further question on this point. Is there any evidence to indicate how much money is lost to the economy because we are not getting those people into university who could be benefiting the country by going there?

Dame Ruth Silver: There is evidence from other places, certainly England, about the cost to the economy of young people not doing as well as they could. That relates to support systems, to how hard jobs are to find and to some of the other issues that young people face. In the 10 months that we had, we did not have enough time or staff to get under the skin of that issue.

The Convener: I am sure that that is true.

Dame Ruth Silver: However, there is evidence from other places.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning. I wish to explore the issue of data. You were clear in the written information that we received on some of the ambitions behind the issues that you have flagged up for the commission. That includes a shared understanding of the barriers, which I think is extremely important. We have a list of eight barriers that have been suggested as key to the issue.

I am interested in the data supporting your findings in that regard and, on a broader issue, in how that data supports the decision by the Scottish Government to insist that universities will accept people from disadvantaged communities as 20 per cent of their intakes by 2030.

Could you say a little more about your concerns over data, which you highlighted in your introductory remarks and in your answer to the convener just now? The committee has sat through a lot of education evidence recently, particularly on the curriculum for excellence. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and lots of experts in Scotland raised the point that the data is not all that great. Without the good data that we need, it is difficult for the committee to make decisions about scrutiny or about what the policy should be. I am asking about that data problem. What is it that we are missing that would help you better to inform the committee and the wider public about what we should be doing?

Dame Ruth Silver: The data generally suffers from the same disease, which is that it is not systemic. There is very good data for particular sectors, but it is in strands. For example, we were surprised to find that there was no way for everything to work together when it came to the exchange of data between the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and inspectors in some local authorities, central bodies or parts of the civil service. People did not know about a lot of the data that other people had heard. Once we got people together, they worked well, but they had never had common cause to do that before.

Liz Smith: I wish to ask about that. In your introductory remarks you said that you thought that some of the collection of data was poor. Is it that we do not have the available data to hand, or is it a question of communicating that data?

Dame Ruth Silver: I think that it is both. Scotland has been through a febrile time of policy change in education. The early years data is now strengthening, and it is being established, but it does not go back far enough. There is a difference in the timescale, and in the concepts that are used behind it.

We were surprised. When the team and I were trying to find some information, we found that teams inside the Scottish funding council had the data. They had some regional data, and some of it was national. It is a question of taking the chance to develop an overarching framework where different sets of data can talk to one another.

By the way, this is not just Scotland's problem. I sit on a group at the Royal Society that is looking at how we can bring things together now that we have super data and so on. It is a problem generally, in England and in other places. Change has happened, some data has not been produced and other data has been developed in different ways. I suggest that we look at that seriously. Institutions have their data and local authorities have theirs, to inform the reports that they have to make to politicians and to Government.

Liz Smith: I can see that Professor Wend wants to come in, but may I first ask one more question? We have the commission's excellent recommendations on what is an important issue. I do not think that there is any disagreement whatever with the principle of widening access, but there are disagreements about how it should happen. It is important that the data that underpins

the decisions about what should happen is comprehensive, coherent, consistent and as valuable as it can be. Otherwise, we will be in danger of pursuing policies without the factual basis that we need, particularly from the scrutiny angle. Do you accept that?

Dame Ruth Silver: I accept that. We had a specialist group look at the matter—it was a joint working party, with Universities Scotland, civil servants and some of our commissioners, which was chaired by an independent commissioner from the Sutton Trust. There are working parties in lots of places, and I think that they have moved things forward; I know that work has gone on since the commission on widening access finished its work. Some parts of the system have taken the matter up.

Liz Smith: What is the timescale for that work being available?

Maureen McKenna (Commission on Widening Access): May I bring something to the committee's attention? The University of Glasgow and west of Scotland local authority partners published a report in December 2016, having drilled right down into all the data that is available from 2009 to 2015, on impact on access. The report is with the SFC just now and I recommend it to the committee. It is a good report.

Liz Smith: Will that be published—

Maureen McKenna: Yes, it is published.

Liz Smith: I know that it has been published, because I have read it, but will it be more widely disseminated? This strikes at the heart of what Dame Ruth Silver said about how good data is sometimes out there but not necessarily available to all the people who need it, particularly in the context of this committee's remit.

Professor Petra Wend (Commission on Widening Access): Another aspect of the data is the definition and interpretation of "deprivation". Our report makes recommendations in relation to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, with targets for 2030—and before that. We realised that SIMD is not the right way to measure deprivation, given that two out of three deprived children live in non-SIMD 20 areas. One of our recommendations is that a unique learner number should be allocated to every child, whereby we could follow the child's progression through life and measure the success of our interventions in the long term. We are not there yet; we have not even started, so in the absence of that approach our targets were about SIMD.

We had a special session on deprivation and data in that context. For a long time, Universities Scotland has worked on a definition of "deprivation", looking at a basket of measures. This is something that we need to take on, in the absence of any measurable way of looking at the issue other than SIMD.

Liz Smith: Thank you.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I accept that SIMD is not the only measure, but did the commission not find that the concentration of deprivation in a community impacts on a school's ability to deliver services? A young person who is learning in such a school, even if they are well supported, perhaps in a family that has a reasonable income, will face different pressures from those that they would face in a school in a non-SIMD area. It is not just about the individual child; deprivation in the communities in which children are learning has a cumulative effect on services.

Professor Wend: I completely agree, but SIMD cannot be the only measure. There is a lot of deprivation in rural areas, which we need to look at, but such areas are not in SIMD 20. We are talking about a basket of measures, which includes SIMD. We need to take SIMD into account.

Johann Lamont: Do you accept that there is an impact on a school's ability to support the young people who attend it, if the community is deprived, because there will be pressures on the school that do not arise in other areas? I accept your point about rurality and I think that other measures can be used in that context, but there is a specific issue to do with the learner journey, which is about the pressures on classes in the community. Do you accept that?

Professor Wend: Yes.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): You have touched on what I was going to ask about. I come from a rural constituency in the north-east of Scotland. The University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University have made recommendations to you in relation to the issue that we are discussing.

Maureen McKenna: We visited them.

Gillian Martin: Yes. What has come out of the discussion about students who could qualify but are being missed because they are not in SIMD 20 areas? What criteria have you added to the mix in order to identify students who might be living in a street or a town that, on the surface, looks affluent but whose household faces issues? What have your findings been in that regard?

Professor Wend: We looked at a basket of, I think, four or five measures. One of the factors concerned low-performing schools, because it is not always the case that low-performing schools are in SIMD 20 areas. I think that we also took free

school meals into account. What else did we look at?

Dame Ruth Silver: We looked at family histories of participation in higher education and the number of pupils that a school sent into higher education.

Maureen McKenna: However, we did not conclude that that was the right basket of indicators. As Dame Ruth has said, the commission did not have the time to be able to say for sure which indicators were the best to use. There is still a lot of work to be done on that area, and there is a view—which has come through in evidence that you have heard today—that the role of the admissions officer is critical with regard to the question of what a contextualised admission would be.

There is a tension around the institution-based approach, the systemic approach and the need to consider people's individual circumstances. You are right to say that the rural dimension is important. Young people and families who live in a rural area might face deprivation and challenges. It is the school that would know that information, so we need to ask how the school can get that information to the admissions officer and how the admissions officer can have the time to sift through the plethora of information that comes in. That is where we need to get better at getting a systemic approach. However, at the same time, we must not forget that we need to ensure that notice is taken of each and every young person who has potential—that is the fairness element that has come out of the commission's work.

Gillian Martin: With regard to the universities that I mentioned, it might be the case that the University of Aberdeen, for example, might look like it is not hitting the targets because it has individual students—hidden students, if you will—who are not identified as being from SIMD 20 areas.

Professor Wend: I completely agree with you. One of our three workstreams is on admissions. We are particularly looking at contextualised admissions and the various criteria that we want to use in that regard. We want to agree on the framework for that across all universities, so we will do more work on that.

Dame Ruth Silver: It is important to state that SIMD was not designed to help universities choose young people; it is a measure that was designed with another intention in mind. It is being used elsewhere. More than anything else, it is a monitoring measure. That is why we badly need to do work on contextualised admissions. The examples that we have given you are simply hypotheses. The work needs to start. The working groups that have been set up are self-authorising, in a way. I am delighted about that, because that is exactly the spirit that we need. Both groups have decided that they will crack on with work while other things are happening. There needs to be leadership and there needs to be a focus on learning, and SIMD is not about learning.

The Convener: Tavish Scott, do you have a question?

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): My question has been asked.

Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con): The Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee discussed SIMD when we considered the Auditor General's report. Following that, I had discussions with the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University. It came through in those discussions that, if we are to increase demand and have more home-grown students going to university, there will be fiercer competition because of the current funding settlement for universities and the cap on places for Scottish students. Some concern was expressed to me that we could displace able students. How do we avoid doing that?

10:30

Professor Wend: That issue was discussed at the commission and we decided that it was not up to us to make recommendations about whether student numbers should be capped but that it was up to the Scottish Government to react to our recommendations.

It is arguable whether displacement is taking place but it is clear that, if we want to have 20 per cent of SIMD 20 students in university by 2030, that means that some students who would get in now might not get in. The question of whether that is fair is a different matter; somebody who would get in now with particular grades might show less potential than a student who would not get in now but would succeed.

It is not right to say that we need 20 per cent more places for that—that does not quite work. However, there is a danger that some students might be squeezed out and it might be the ones who are just about getting into university—the squeezed middle, so to speak—so we need to consider that carefully in all three of our workstreams in Universities Scotland. We have already addressed it. The three leaders of the workstreams meet regularly to consider it but all that we can do is work in the environment within which we are working and do our best.

Dame Ruth Silver: I am independent now because I stood down the day after we launched the report, so I can say that there is displacement now of bright young people who do not have the

right badges through no fault of their own. In the four nations, Scotland has the highest percentage of advantaged young people going to university.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): To stick to the conversation that we are having about SIMD, there is an area of high deprivation in the area that I represent. For me, the issue is still an attitudinal one—I do not know whether you detected that when you were considering the matter. I was lucky enough to go to university when I finished school and, like a few of the friends who I went with, I was the first in my family to go. However, going around schools in the area, I still feel that there is a consensus among a lot of young people that university is not for them and they would not be able to go to university, so there is a societal and attitudinal issue.

When you were investigating the circumstances, what exactly did you find that prevented people in SIMD areas or other areas from going to university? For example, how is welfare reform impacting?

Dame Ruth Silver: You are spot on with that. The attitude is a big problem. Robert Gordon University has a fabulous set up in which it has a pre-freshers scheme. All of the problems are cracked in some place or another in Scotland.

The attitude that you describe is about not only getting into university but staying there and the jobs for which people apply when they leave. It goes on and can be a lifelong burden if we are not careful. It definitely exists. The young people who have broken through and tackled it have done so with support—support for learners as well as support for learning—but we are very aware of the issue.

I did a couple of the summer schools—I went along as a summer school learner and sat in on some of the teaching. People said that those learners would not go to summer schools because they need to work and do not have money. However, they went to summer schools and worked hard at weekends. They mentored one another on how to have more confidence—"how not to be put down by the posh ones" is how one of the young women described it.

The attitudinal issue is a big problem and is really palpable. I have always worked in areas of deprivation and access is my speciality and I noted instantly how hard it was for the young people to see themselves in the positions that we are talking about. However, work is going on in early years, for example, to address it. You can walk into an early years classroom and the teddy bear on the desk is sitting there in a gown and mortar board. Work to take on some of the issues is reaching back down the system, because the problem is a big one even when somebody has the qualifications.

Gillian Martin: To go back to what Professor Wend said, we have not mentioned the role of colleges. I do not particularly agree with the displacement idea, because there is always a place. What is the role of colleges in higher education? Colleges provide that, of course, and a route to university for people.

Professor Wend: One of the workstreams that we are leading on in Universities Scotland is on articulation. Obviously, colleges play a big role in that, and universities and colleges in Scotland can improve on that. We need to be mindful that the courses that are taught in colleges are not only feeder programmes for universities, and we need to find the right framework for that. Those who are able to go to university should do so, and they should be encouraged to do so, but we need closer working relationships between colleges in Scotland to look at curriculums so that they fit, as we do not want the articulation students to fail once they get into university because the curriculums are not matched. We are looking at that very closely in one of our three workstreams.

Colleges play a huge role in higher education, but we must not forget that they also offer skills and prepare people for work. They do not just provide feeder courses for universities.

Dame Ruth Silver: My background is in further education—I have been a college principal—and I greatly admire the concept of articulation. Some of the work that I have seen is splendid.

Scotland is on the cusp of a risk in how it sees articulation. Members will know that access has been widened in Scotland through its college system much more than through its university system. Let us be clear about that. That is wonderful, and I brag about it in England, but there is something really wrong at the engagement end. We found young and older people doing the same level twice. They moved from college to university, but crossed over to the same level; there was no progression. That was for very good reasons—the modules did not fit, or they needed a specialism—and that is why we have the framework for access.

On the whole, articulation is not portable. What a person does to get into one university is not nationally portable; there will be an agreement or compact between institutions. Nevertheless, it is a fabulous way of working, and it has worked for Scotland. However, the approach is on the cusp of the risk that it will be seen as second class, not portable, costing more money and involving people wasting money doing things on the same level. That should not happen; it is not right.

Gillian Martin: You mentioned variation in the country. Are there examples of very good practice

in which colleges and universities have arrangements that absolutely gel?

Dame Ruth Silver: Yes. There are examples of university lecturers working with college lecturers on the same programme with the same students, so people cannot tell the difference. In other cases, they do not see one another.

Fulton MacGregor: This is a bit broad brush and general, but did you find that there was any difference at all between young people who had intended to go to university or college for a long time—possibly all their life or for a good few years before university or college—and young people who got to the age of 15, 16 or 17 and realised that they needed to do something but had maybe not thought about going to college or university because their life until then had been taken up with dealing with parental, mental health, alcohol or drug abuse issues, being a young carer or living in dire poverty? Did you detect a difference between those two broad groups of people?

Dame Ruth Silver: I will ask Maureen McKenna to comment on that, as she runs Glasgow's schools.

Maureen McKenna: The commission did not look at that level of detail, but I will draw on my experience in Glasgow. We work incredibly hard with our partner universities and colleges to pull experiences further down the school, so that young people do not get to the age of 15 and suddenly think, "Gee, I don't really know about college or university." We have an incredibly wide range of initiatives on the go. One issue for me is that there are too many initiatives—there is overlap—and we are battling over the same group of young people.

In order to get best value, we need to streamline, which goes back to Dame Ruth's point about access being institutionally based. The University of Glasgow runs its summer school for young people going there and the University of Strathclyde does the same, so why is there not one summer school that gives young people access to any university in Scotland?

There are little things like that, but access work is also about the importance of having young people, and children—going right back, from the early years on—exposed to that broader range of experiences, with their parents too. For example, we work with Glasgow Caledonian University, which runs its Caledonian club in learning communities, working with children aged three to 18—so all the way through—with a wide variety of experiences to make going to university normal. Actually, its work is about learning—it does not have to be about that particular university; it is about showing that education makes a difference to people's lives and how important that is.

Family learning, which is being pushed just now in a whole range of places, is very important, but the families need to get qualifications. It is not just about saying, "Come and learn how to read together with your child"; that has a place, but if we really want to make a systemic difference, we need to encourage our families.

There is research evidence to show that a young person's potential correlates strongly with the mother's qualifications. Using that as a baseline, we can say that we need to have families who are qualified, and that means that we need to be more flexible about entry. A lot of the talk is about schools—and rightly, because that is the bulk of what we are talking about—but we also have young parents who, for a whole range of reasons, have had to move out of education. Do we provide enough pathways to bring them back in? Does the way that we fund our college sector and our universities enable fair access for people whose pathways might take them a little bit longer? We have taken steps around the care experience, but this is tricky territory; it is about individual people and the experiences that they bring, so it is not easy.

Tavish Scott: You will have to forgive me for asking this, but are we obsessed with universities? Are they the be-all and end-all of life in Scotland?

Maureen McKenna: Petra is. [*Laughter*.]

Dame Ruth Silver: I find myself in the position of bragging about Scotland in England, but I really have to say different things up here. Absolutely. I grew up in Lanarkshire and stayed there a bit when I was here. I used to love going into Glasgow on the train in the mornings, because I would hear young people having a debate about the current issues: "Shall I go to this university, because I get an extra year and I get work experience, or shall I go there?" I do not hear those conversations on the tube in London.

The debate is there, and it is to our credit that people value education so highly—and less here because it is a route to work. That will change but, certainly in my experience, education is valued here as being a good thing in its own right. The evidence is, of course, that more people here go on to university than in the other three United Kingdom nations.

Tavish Scott: Is that a good thing?

Maureen McKenna: Yes—I will nail my colours to the mast. Yes, I think that it is.

Dame Ruth Silver: Of course it is—but, actually, what is offered in Scotland is different from what is offered in England. There are other things going on there as well. I could talk a lot about this, but one of the strengths in your system is the college system. Higher education and

higher-level skills in Scotland are stronger than they are in other parts of the country. That is because people in Scotland want to have jobs, and that approach has always been there.

Tavish Scott: To be honest, I was not so worried about England; I was more worried about being part of a parliamentary committee 15 years ago that wrote reports about parity of esteem between vocational routes into economic life and university education. You have rather confirmed that we have not made any progress on that in 15 years—or have we?

Dame Ruth Silver: Me too, but I wonder whether we were chasing the right thing. I have become much more addicted to the concept of parity of outcome than to parity of esteem. We cannot dictate esteem, but we can actually measure, monitor and target outcomes, so I think that parity of outcome is the test of access.

Professor Wend: For me, access has to be seen very much from the child's or person's perspective. They need to have options available to them, so barriers to whatever the right outcome for them is need to be removed.

As an example, we could look at the academies programme that Queen Margaret University is running, which is a two-year programme that is taught jointly with schools, colleges, universities and employers. After one year, children can decide whether they want to stay in school, go to college or do two more years and then go to university. Coming back to the previous question about aspirations, I think that widening access is not about saying that university is the be-all and end-all but about removing barriers in order to make it a possibility and ensuring that children know that it is a possibility. In the same vein, the aim of the children's university that we are running in Scotland is to get children and their parents and carers into the university to show them that going there might be one of the options, not what they should be doing.

10:45

I lead on the bridging programmes for Scotland; I note that the commission's report talks mainly about summer schools, but I want to widen that to consider all kinds of bridging programmes. What they all have in common is that university is an option and that children and parents are well informed on what the possibilities are for them. The children's university might well be part of that, as it goes back to the young five to 14 age group and seeks to raise aspirations.

In response to the original question, I note that the four universities in Edinburgh have already got together to look at the raising aspirations programme, so that we do not overburden schools with programmes from all sides that say, "Come to us and we'll help you get into university." We want a coherent programme that gives schools an easier choice.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I seek confirmation of Professor Wend's interesting comment that two out of three young people live in areas that we would not consider to be deprived. That seems a high proportion.

Professor Wend: Two out of three are deprived but do not live in a deprived area.

Colin Beattie: So two out of three are deprived but do not live in a deprived area. Where did that figure come from?

Professor Wend: I do not know—it is part of research that we have done as part of research that Universities Scotland undertook to work out the basket of measures for deprivation.

Colin Beattie: I have not seen that figure before, so I am quite interested in it.

Professor Wend: I will dig it out and send it to you.

Colin Beattie: That would be perfect. Do you know what proportion is rural?

Professor Wend: No. I am sure that we do, but I do not have that information here. I can send it to the convener.

Colin Beattie: Excellent.

Obviously targeting is quite important. As has been discussed around the table this morning, the suggestion is that SIMD data is not as accurate as it should be. It has also been suggested that we complement that data with information from other sources. One example that has been given is data on parental occupation, but that seems to me to be very dodgy, as it smacks a bit of elitism. There are not many stockbrokers in my constituency, but there are lots of very well-off plumbers, joiners and electricians. How would you take that sort of approach?

Professor Wend: We have looked at that in our admissions group, but we are still very uncertain about it. We need to come up with a framework that is understood by not only us but—and this is most important—the potential students, the teachers and the parents and carers. That is part of the problem; although we already work with contextualised admissions, even universities do not quite understand what other universities are doing. If we do not understand that, how can potential students understand it? That is our aim.

Dame Ruth Silver: That comes back to our recommendation that contextual admissions be

published and known to parents and schools. That sort of thing does not happen at the moment.

Colin Beattie: I could see you picking out parents who are unemployed, for example, but there is a huge chunk of working poor out there, who are just making ends meet and are bumping along at the very bottom. How do you pick them up?

Professor Wend: It will not be easy.

Colin Beattie: But is it possible?

Dame Ruth Silver: I think so, but it is a mistake to look for one factor in that way. We need a system of factors to give us the texture of the young or older person who is applying to university. The issue is the combination of those factors.

Colin Beattie: But each factor has to be robust, or you will not get the desired result.

Dame Ruth Silver: Absolutely, and it will be part of the phase of exploration in all of this. In the end, however, the issue is compound disadvantage.

Professor Wend: Moreover, you cannot be completely mechanistic, because every person is different. You cannot say, "This person is a plumber, so they can take this." That would be impossible. Instead, we need to have interviews, get to know the person and so on. The process will be very time consuming, but we need a more individualised approach.

Colin Beattie: However, if we are looking for something that can be put in place across the country, an individualised approach becomes quite difficult.

Professor Wend: Yes.

Maureen McKenna: I suppose that you are talking about a situation in which the person fills in the application form and that is the first time that the universities get to see them. We are talking about a range of programmes with the universities, such as the work that Queen Margaret University does with its schools, so that the universities get to know the young people from a younger age and the young people get to know the universities. In that way, contextualisation begins to come from points of knowledge. That approach improves the knowledge of the young person and their family, but it also improves the university's knowledge of the young person and enables the contextualisation to be more robust.

It will never be a case of saying, "If you're in that category, it will get you in and if you're not, you will not get in." I return to the point about the need to consider the difference, or the tension, between the systemic approach that is needed in order to get better value from what we deliver and the individual. That requires people in schools to have better connections with and knowledge of universities and, equally, people in universities.

In Glasgow, we phone up admissions officers and engage in conversations on individual cases. Sometimes that results in the young person getting in and sometimes it does not but, on each side, we have learned more so that, next time, we know more about how we can contextualise and get the right qualifications and experiences for the young person to enable them to succeed.

Dame Ruth Silver: One of the phrases that we used a lot in the commission was "building ladders down" into communities, schools and so on. We saw an example at the University of Glasgow, where students who had been contacted earlier through the schools and had participated in pre-university programmes were on a management information system that identified them, so that, when they came into the university, they could be targeted, particularly for deficits in their background, but it looked ordinary. For example, the university would send flyers to young people from a school where there had been a problem with maths teaching to offer them extra maths stuff, but it looked to the students as if everybody was getting the leaflet. That is a delicate and sensitive way of handling young people both before and when they come in.

As I said, access is not just about getting in; it is also about staying in and moving on from that—it is about access, success and then progress. Students need to have success in the middle, and that means people working together.

Colin Beattie: Another suggestion that has been made in terms of complementing SIMD data is level of education, but surely that is already picked up through contextualised admissions. How would that feed in when it is already there?

Professor Wend: Could you rephrase your question? That is not part of the basket of measures.

Colin Beattie: There is a suggestion that SIMD data should be complemented by a number of other sources. For example, parental occupation was thrown out as one thing, and level of education is another. However, I look at contextualised admissions and think, "Isn't that already being taken into account by the universities?"

Dame Ruth Silver: We wonder whether that is the parents' level of education and not the individual's.

Colin Beattie: I am talking about the youngster's level of education. Somebody who comes from school with a deprived background who is achieving less than someone from a better

background could nevertheless be deemed to have done better simply because of the background that they come from.

Dame Ruth Silver: Yes.

Maureen McKenna: Yes.

Professor Wend: Yes. Universities are already taking all of that into account, but we do not do it in a systemic way across Scotland and it is not very clear which university does what and how. At Queen Margaret University, we have Universities and Colleges Admissions Service entry points, but we admit students who do not fulfil those because we are looking at the overall person. Every university is already engaged in that, but it is not very clear or obvious to the children, parents, teachers and so on how we are all doing it. We need to become clearer about that and there needs to be a clearer framework across Scotland.

Colin Beattie: I have a final question. How do colleges fit into this? There is articulation and so on, but how do colleges fit into the SIMD work, the identification of teachers and so on?

Dame Ruth Silver: In Scotland, you have the advantage of having regionalised your colleges in governance terms. You now have regional boards that know what is going on in the area that they lead to, and that is an enormous help. They are key in the ladder of access because they are focused on place—I think that I mentioned that as one of the key components—in relation to both learners and opportunities for work and study.

My favourite description of colleges is that we are the mezzanine floor in the education system. We are not protected by the law, because we are not compulsory; and we are not protected by the Queen, because we do not have royal charter status. The changes that go on in colleges are therefore absolutely in the moment.

The Convener: Before going on to Johann Lamont, I remind members that supplementary questions should be supplementary to a question that has been asked and that members should make sure that their supplementary is relevant to the question that has just been asked or the answer that has just been given. We still have a lot to get through and we have another panel after this, so I ask for questions and answers to be as short as possible.

Johann Lamont: I will not take it personally that you have said that just before I come in.

The Convener: I assure you that it is pure coincidence.

Johann Lamont: I am interested in what has been said about the evidence for the benefits of college regionalisation, because I have not seen that on the ground. If the issue is not parity of esteem but parity of outcome, do you have a view on parity of resources? We have seen funding for the college sector cut and disproportionate cuts to the number of part-time places in colleges, which mean that young parents with caring responsibilities, for example, cannot do college courses. I do not know whether you have looked at that in your work.

Dame Ruth Silver: Not only did I look at it, but I lived my life in similar circumstances. I do have views; this is what happens when an area is not protected by the law or the Queen. It is the place that, on the whole, politicians turn to first to bring about change. The budget is not protected, and not having protection makes great big holes in the stepped approach to widening access.

I will say a bit about regionalisation. I think that I first met you when I did the curriculum review for the Glasgow colleges, when we looked at every course in every college and looked at—this is my favourite phrase—curriculum intention and found overlap and so on. The gain is in that; it is not just in governance but in working together to ensure that resources are being employed and deployed usefully. That is not about colleges doing the same courses as each other but about ensuring that there is progression within institutions. It is early days, because regionalisation is a revolution.

Johann Lamont: With respect, my observation is that in the community where I taught, the outreach work that colleges did no longer happens. Young people in some areas will not travel, so having a quality institution that is near them encourages them and draws them in. I have grave reservations about the college sector's capacity to provide second-chance learning when we in the school system fail learners. There is a big question about that, but perhaps that is an issue for a different inquiry.

Dame Ruth Silver: I completely share your concern; it is a disaster waiting to happen. However, that is policy led and funding led.

Johann Lamont: It is not my policy and not my Government. Given that we are looking at access and fairness and given that your report says that colleges are important, we have to look at how the college sector has suffered.

I am interested to know what you looked at in terms of our schools. Did you look at the disproportionate disadvantage, even within disadvantage, whereby boys are less likely to do well than girls are? That is not just about income. There is also an issue about ethnicity and opportunity. Did you look at drop-out rates at school level? Many young people do not get even to compete—they do not get the opportunity even to be denied a place at university, because they are no longer in school.

Dame Ruth Silver: Absolutely. We did not have much time to look at that, but we know that it is a really big issue. We looked at solutions, so we looked at some of the programmes in the Glasgow schools and at what is being done to compensate for the disadvantage. There is a squeezed middle in terms of not just individuals but institutions. The college sector has found clever ways of still working with young people, which is to the credit of its creativity and its good links with education authorities and employers, but that is not systematic.

Johann Lamont: If there are cuts to school budgets, they often come to the bits of the system that support young people to stay in school—there are such programmes all over the place. That in itself is, in effect, a barrier to a young person learning.

Dame Ruth Silver: It is, and it is a growing barrier.

Johann Lamont: In your recommendations, have you addressed the importance of the soft supports to draw young people into school?

Dame Ruth Silver: We talked a lot about the importance of learning support. The heart of the matter that you raise is not for the commission to discuss; it concerns Government policies on funding and resources, which we decided not to talk about.

Johann Lamont: Is there a contradiction in being asked by the Government to address fair access and not commenting on some of the issues that may be creating the concerns?

11:00

Dame Ruth Silver: We certainly commented on those issues, but we did not make recommendations on them.

Professor Wend: We made recommendations that talk about a holistic approach, because we cannot talk about admissions without talking about schools and colleges. That is why we recommended a commissioner for fair access, who might have the oversight to make recommendations to the Scottish Government on schools, colleges and universities. We had not only schools, employers and colleges represented, but early years providers; we could see that access is a question from the cradle to the grave. That is why we made the concrete recommendation that there must be a holistic approach. The commission was about widening access to universities, and the practical recommendations had to concern universities—that was our remit.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Dame Ruth Silver mentioned compound disadvantage. Will you lay out the findings in the report in relation to young people with additional support needs? Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are proportionately far more likely to have additional support needs. If those needs go unsupported, they act as a multiplier to the existing disadvantage. I have heard plenty of anecdotal evidence of young people with ASN not being directed towards even making an application in the first place. What did you find in relation to ASN?

Dame Ruth Silver: The situation is exactly as you describe. One of the successes that we found—I will talk about that because we were an appreciative inquiry—occurred when the receiving end of the progression did the learning support. Support from a pre-fresher summer programme made matters become more real and boosted motivation. Young people and mentors from the university—people who had graduated—who worked with the young people saw the next stage of what the young people could become.

There is no way that we can achieve access without learning support. There is such a lot of catch-up; this is compensatory education in its truest sense. That has to be in the hands of the right people. What I saw in Scotland was compensatory education in terms of learning support all the way—it was not done by institutions working alone; there were volunteers in the community, all sorts of employer projects, and school and university staff working differently. That is crucial, because we must not widen participation to further failure.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): In the interests of time, I will ask just one question. Convener, will you allow me to explain it?

The Convener: I will, if it is one question.

Daniel Johnson: We have talked a lot about articulation, which is important. However, in my discussions with the people who run the engineering academy at the University of Strathclyde, I have been told that a lot of wraparound work is done before students join and once they have done so.

I bear in mind what Dame Ruth Silver said about making sure that college qualifications and other routes to university are not just routes to university. Making articulation work requires a lot more than just routes to university; support is required for students before and after they articulate. Do you agree with that sentiment? What investment and support need to be put in place to make articulation work properly—from colleges and from other potential routes, such as apprenticeships and the wider skills sector?

Dame Ruth Silver: The origins of articulation are in vocational and technical scientific training.

Lots of the students we spoke to had no wish to go any further than getting the college part of the qualifications, but others did, and others came back later. The notion of portability is not just about location; it is also about time. Running a curriculum such as that is really complicated. I like the wide base and the vocational focus. A famous Scottish report from years ago—the Brunswick report from way back in time—talked about the importance of a vocational focus in widening access.

We looked at why articulation is great in some places and not so good in others. There was one attempt at articulation in an arts subject area, but that did not work quite so well. Like the access work, that has grown and grown, but there has not been the chance to reflect on and refine it. There are different streams to that, as some people go on to do higher education qualifications later.

There is a lovely mezzanine floor; it is a lovely pausing point to revisit the intention of learners. Some of them change their mind and try work. We met some young people who had started a two-plus-two course in a college and gone on to university. However, they did not like university, so they went back to college. The college found a way of working with the university and with the Open University so that those students could qualify. Modular qualifications are a great answer, but they are complicated to get to.

I mentioned underused assets in Scotland. I remember saying to the Open University, "You should be ashamed—you are so modest, yet you are doing fabulous things for young people." I have seen degrees being done in Glasgow with the qualification system of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. That is what I meant by it all being there in Scotland—it just has to be harvested, pruned and farmed in a wide way.

Ross Thomson: The committee has done a lot of work in looking at the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland. As part of that, we looked at the interaction between ministers and the agencies. Johann Lamont has previously asked questions about whether, when policy has not achieved the right outcome, that has been challenged. Today, Liz Smith asked questions about ensuring that data is there for decision making and asked about how we got to the 20 per cent figure and how we will achieve that. There was discussion about SIMD not really being the right measure, so perhaps we need something that is more sophisticated. Dame Ruth Silver, as the commissioner, are you able to challenge the Government and will you do so?

Dame Ruth Silver: I am not the commissioner.

Ross Thomson: Apologies.

Dame Ruth Silver: I was stood down. The commissioner is sitting behind me in the public gallery waiting to come on.

On the leadership of the system, the system involves the Government as well—it is not outside the system and it has an important role. If I were the commissioner, I would absolutely challenge the Government, but you can ask him in a minute.

Ross Thomson: I will.

Liz Smith: I am interested in contextualised entry and access thresholds, and you have indicated that that is pretty complex and that such decisions are difficult. You said that there was lots of evidence that Scotland is already doing many good things but that the work is not joined up and not universal across the system. Do you believe that decisions about contextualised entry—particularly when that comes to access thresholds, which are a specialised part of that—are a matter for individual university departments or that there should be intervention from the Government?

Professor Wend: In universities, we are trying to lead on making the right recommendations. We are in regular contact with Sir Peter Scott about that to ensure that we work not only in parallel but constructively together. Universities Scotland has started a workstream on that. I am sure that we will not come up with one access threshold for each subject; the approach needs to be more sophisticated than that, because universities are different. We will come up with a framework that will be easy to understand and far more accessible.

Liz Smith: You are all supporters of the autonomy of the system and I know that the commissioner has a long record of that. In that context, should the decisions, which appear to work well in some universities, rest with the individual institutions and their departments, which have different demand and supply levels and different conditions?

Professor Wend: Universities are autonomous and we continue to defend that. As lead persons on the three workstreams, we have made it clear that we do not want to come up with a narrative that pleases just the commissioner, the Scottish Government or others; instead, we want to come up with something that universities really want to embrace and do. We believe in that fiercely, and it is something that we as the three chairs of the programmes have already agreed.

Dame Ruth Silver: The report talks about trusting the professionals and letting them deliver in the first five-year phase. I have already claimed that Scotland knows how to do this; let us see what the professionals come up with and what it looks like in five years' time.

My clear view is that this is doable. Of course it will all need to be looked at in order to make things ready for the next five years, but we need to give those people—after all, they are the professionals—the space to do the work. Given that any two courses will have different entry requirements depending on subjects and levels, we need some professional intricacy to be present as well as being observable, published and scrutinised.

The Convener: Does Tavish Scott have a supplementary?

Tavish Scott: My question is on a different issue.

The Convener: In that case, I will let Gillian Martin in first with a question on carers.

Gillian Martin: You have referred to recommendations on people who are care experienced, but I note that young carers have issues, too. Did you have any dialogue with young carers and their families?

Professor Wend: Yes—we had dialogue with young carers, too. To go back to Universities Scotland's three workstreams, I should point out that we are looking at every aspect and do not want to limit ourselves to the groups that are described in the commission's report. We want to look at part-timers, adult learners and carers—that is all part of our work.

Tavish Scott: Recommendation 17 refers to Skills Development Scotland and schools working together. It says:

"SDS and schools should"

assist

"learners at key transition phases throughout their education."

I guess that you made that recommendation because you had concerns about what is happening between SDS and schools. Would it be possible for you to elaborate on your concerns?

Maureen McKenna: I am happy to take that question. We took some of our evidence from work that was done by the commission on developing Scotland's young workforce, which, as you know, made recommendations on careers advice and guidance and on SDS working further down the school. Evidence that we received endorsed that recommendation, but it also suggested that such advice should not remain just within the school but stretch into the college or university.

To go back to the discussion that we just had about different entries, I think that data is needed on skills shortages and employment areas, which then needs to be fed into the university system through SDS and the various organisations, to ensure that we have the pipelines coming through. That might mean having to alter entry thresholds at various times.

Our recommendation was really about saying that SDS and its careers advice and guidance have to go much further down the school, in recognition of the fact that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular, need such interventions much earlier. In that respect, I point out that we talked not about SIMD but about learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. To throw in my own comment, I think that SIMD is a reasonable metric and should not be discounted. It is a basket of indicators, but the fact is that no statistic is perfect. Looking for one particular measure that has the answer for everything will be a lost cause.

Tavish Scott: That is not the issue for me. I am interested in whether Skills Development Scotland is flexible enough to meet your recommendation as I read it. Do you think that it is?

Maureen McKenna: From a Glasgow perspective, my answer is no, although it tries its best.

Tavish Scott: Do you suggest that we keep an eye on that recommendation, given that the area is important?

Maureen McKenna: I certainly do.

Tavish Scott: That is helpful—thank you.

The Convener: We have come to the end of the evidence-taking session. I thank the witnesses for their time and the very useful information that they have given. It was nice to meet you all.

I suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes to allow the panels to change over.

11:14

Meeting suspended.

11:20

On resuming—

Commissioner for Fair Access

The Convener: Item 3 is evidence taking from Peter Scott, the newly appointed Commissioner for Fair Access. Welcome, Professor Scott, and congratulations on your appointment. I understand that you would like to make some opening remarks.

Professor Peter Scott (Commissioner for Fair Access): I will be brief. I have provided a written submission, which I hope is useful.

It is a great honour to be appointed to this position. I am keenly aware of the burden of expectation that is pressing on my shoulders. This is a great opportunity. As Ruth Silver said, there are many great examples of good practice across Scotland in the area of fair access.

In my written submission, I tried to do three things. First, I tried to be open and frank about my starting point and beliefs. I hope that I have not done that in a dogmatic way. I assure the committee that I am not prejudging any issue.

Secondly, I tried to foresee what some of the key debates might be—it became apparent from the committee's questions to the previous panel that those are some of the key debates. I emphasised that although the issues have a strong and particular resonance in Scotland, they are more general; they are familiar across the United Kingdom, across Europe and across the world.

Thirdly, I briefly touched on and offered a very preliminary view on a number of more specific and detailed topics, which again came out in your earlier questions. I emphasise that there are many other issues, which I have not covered but which might be equally important, particularly in relation to student support and funding.

I want to allow the maximum time for committee members to ask questions, which I will of course do my best to answer, including a question of which I have had pre-notification, so I will make just two further preliminary remarks.

First, in a sense, the founding text of British higher education is the Robbins report, which was published more than half a century ago. That report established a famous principle, which was that higher education should be available to all those who have the potential to benefit and the willingness to do so. That has been widely accepted, for the past half century, as a fundamental principle. In one sense, therefore, we are pushing at an open door on fair access. I do not think that I have ever come across anyone who does not think that access should be fairer than it currently is. There are, of course, great difficulties in establishing how we achieve that.

There are one or two key words in the Robbins principle, the first of which is "all". It does not say that higher education is for people who have particular social advantages or parents who are graduates; it says that it is for all. A second key word is "potential". The emphasis should be on potential, which leads to discussions about contextualised admissions and so on. In the UK and in the Republic of Ireland, unlike most other European countries, higher education institutions in effect choose their students—they decide which students have the greatest potential and choose on that basis. There is no automatic entitlement, as there is in France for someone who passes their baccalauréat, in Germany for someone who passes their Abitur, or in some American states, where someone who graduates sufficiently high in their high school class is automatically entitled to a place in higher education. Universities have always been in the business of measuring potential, although that is difficult.

The second preliminary remark that I would like to make is, in a sense, a very personal one. I recently acquired a new grandchild, who is still under two, and I am 90 or 95 per cent confident that she will go to university. She will probably go to a good university. Both her parents are graduates, and her grandparents on my side are also graduates although, like many baby boomers, we were first-generation graduates. My concern is that I am not so certain that other babies who were born in the same hospital on the same night will achieve those ambitions. We all have a responsibility to ensure that we at least strive to create greater fairness in the system.

At that point, I would like to stop and answer your questions, if I can.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Congratulations on your new grandchild—that is always one of life's blessings.

Your final comments play into my first question, which is about targeting. You say in your submission that you see SIMD as a "sophisticated metric". I know that there is a difference of opinion, both around the table and even among the witnesses, about how effective SIMD is. I am sure that you are not saying that SIMD is the only method of measuring disadvantage but recognise that other methods must be used along with it. Can you explain what you think those other methods are and how you would capture them?

Professor Scott: SIMD is a relatively comprehensive measure, as it takes into account multiple aspects of deprivation as opposed to single measures. As has been said this morning,

there are strong links between areas of deprivation and lower-performing schools. A much more limited range of people who have graduate qualifications live in those areas. A range of things come together to intensify disadvantage. However, as I said in my opening remarks, I am aware that there are issues with any area-based metric in that it will produce what might be called false positives and false negatives, and we should be sensitive to that.

The work that Universities Scotland is undertaking in looking at those areas and the scepticism that Universities Scotland has about how appropriate SIMD is as a measure to determine targets are to be welcomed. Any work that can be done to develop a more sophisticated basket of measures should be encouraged. However, SIMD is not a bad starting point—that is what I am saying.

The Convener: That is a fair thing to say. Liz Smith would like to come in on the same subject.

Liz Smith: One of the most interesting things for us—we heard about it from the previous panel—is that although universities are doing certain things extremely well, there are weaknesses and things that still need to be done. In the short time for which you have been in the job, have you seen areas in which there are already strengths that need to be built on and developed across the institutions? In particular, can you flag up where you think there are weaknesses that we need to address?

Professor Scott: I will try. I hope that I will not be unfair in any comments that I make. The strengths are very much in bridging programmes, summer schools and links with colleges in relation to special programmes. “Weakness” is much too strong a word, but articulation could be improved, as I outline in my written submission. That is my broad conclusion at this point.

As Ruth Silver said, a lot of that practice is customised—it is for a particular college and a particular institution working together, often in a particular subject area—so it is very targeted. The challenge is to generalise some of that experience, making it more compatible, so that students are not necessarily locked into a limited range of choices but have a wider range of choices. Equally, however, I would not be in favour of trying to produce an overcentralised and overdetermined system.

Liz Smith: We referred to problems with data with the previous panel. I return to the point that the data set is extremely important, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in leading us to identify where the problems lie and in giving direction to you and to the Scottish Government.

Do you agree that, generally speaking, there is quite good data but that it is not put across in a systemic manner, or is there a lack of data? What would you like to be done to help to inform you and to allow you to do your job as well as possible?

11:30

Professor Scott: There is certainly a lot of data available, although it is often not presented in a terribly helpful form. I will give one example. Data is often divided between younger initial entrants and more mature initial entrants. In the reality that we now face in universities and colleges, that is not always a helpful distinction, but it is difficult to get data that is not compartmentalised in that way.

There are masses of more qualitative data at a more individual, institutional, programme or subject level. It is often very customised. In its report, the commission noted its concern about the lack of evaluation of things that worked well and things that worked less well.

People who are enthusiastic about fair access and who have put a lot of personal effort and commitment into developing a programme do not want to be told that it has not worked very well, so there is a bias towards saying that programmes have been successful. We might need to find ways to be a bit more rigorous about evaluation, without in any way dampening people’s enthusiasm or discouraging them from experimenting with new ways of doing things.

Liz Smith: I think you are right about that. What you said about nobody having a divine right to go to university is absolutely correct. It is a great strength of the system that it is left to the institutions to decide who has the right potential.

However, the issue comes back to the data. If we go down the road of having more consistent contextualised entry along with some flexibility on the access thresholds, the knowledge that institutions and, specifically, their departments have will be critical to their making the right decisions about to whom they offer a place. That is absolutely essential. Do we need to do more to allow institutions, which are autonomous—and whose autonomy I know you greatly support—to have a better understanding of where that data could come from?

Professor Scott: Yes, that has to be true. As Ruth Silver said, it is absolutely right to trust the professionals. We should always trust people who are working in the areas concerned.

The best approach to contextualised admissions should be to leave the detailed work with institutions—and I would say not just with institutions but with subjects. The people who

understand contextualised admissions in relation to fine art will be very different from the people who understand contextualised admissions in the context of electrical engineering. Subject expertise is as important as the institutional perspective.

I hope that Universities Scotland will carry this forward in its work. There is value in developing broad guidelines on the kind of factors that might go into the mix when it comes to contextualised admissions and on the approximate weight that should be attached to them. I am talking about some broad guidelines, not a rigid prescription by any means.

One should of course rely on the expertise of the people who are directly involved in particular subjects when it comes to the factors that it is appropriate to take into account. In general, one should struggle to make things transparent so that experience can be shared across institutions and, crucially, so that it becomes more plain to potential applicants how they will be judged.

Tavish Scott: Thank you for the breadth of your submission, Professor Scott. That breadth points to the weight of the tasks that you plan to undertake. Given that context, how many days a month are you contracted to provide in the role?

Professor Scott: I am contracted to provide three to five days a month. I am realistic and understand that the work will probably take more than that. My assumption is that I should spend at least five days a month physically present in Scotland, and I suspect that, in reality, I might spend as much time again thinking, reading and communicating with people. As far as the contract is concerned, I think that the number of days was determined for funding reasons, in order to put a cap on the commitment. I absolutely agree with that approach.

Tavish Scott: Has the Government given you a budget and arranged for staff to support you in your role?

Professor Scott: I have inherited the excellent staff who supported the work of the commission. In the short run, they will be working with me. I do not have a budget. I noticed that there are references in the commission's report to commissioning research. At the moment, I do not have any resources to do that. However, in specific instances, if there seems to be a need for research, I would go back to the Government and suggest that it provides some resources. Equally, one needs to work with other research organisations to try to shape their research agendas.

Tavish Scott: Liz Smith has just been asking about research on SIMD, which you mentioned in your submission. Do you consider that research to be important enough to warrant your asking the Government for resources?

Professor Scott: In the first place, I need to do a lot of work to understand the issues better. It would be premature for me to make demands on the basis of my half-understanding of some of the issues. However, as I said, I think that the search for the most sensitive possible metrics should be encouraged as much as possible, and I see myself as playing some role in that.

Tavish Scott: The commission made many recommendations. Does your job description task you with implementing those recommendations?

Professor Scott: I should emphasise that some of the recommendations are directed to me, some are directed to the Government and some are directed to the funding council. I suspect that some of my responsibility might be to manage down expectations about what the commissioner can deliver. Equally, I accept that the commissioner has a key role, and that that is the challenge for me. I have given a great deal of thought to how I might work. At this stage, I am in the mode of listening to people, meeting the relative stakeholders and visiting institutions to find out what people are doing on the ground. At some point, I will need to move into a more proactive mode.

Tavish Scott: Do you see yourself as overseeing the situation with regard to the recommendations for the Government and the funding council, and, in a sense, keeping those organisations on the right track?

Professor Scott: It is certainly my responsibility to comment on that situation, if I think that that is appropriate. One of the few formal responsibilities that I have been given is to produce an annual report. I assure you—this will perhaps pre-empt another question—that I will do that without fear or favour. Equally, I hope that my reports will be grounded in evidence and be well informed and sensitive.

In certain situations, it will be quite difficult to establish precisely the degree to which I should become deeply involved in things and the point at which I should stand back so that I can make judgments. I am the first commissioner—not only am I new, but the role is new—so, to some degree, we are at an experimental stage. I think that, in a year, you and I will have a much better idea of whether things are working.

One thing that I can promise you is that I have no intention of trying to operate via a Twitter account.

Tavish Scott: It is very popular these days.

Professor Scott: I know it is.

Tavish Scott: You should be grateful, at least, that they have not called you a tsar.

I want to ask a final question, if I may. If the week that you plan to spend in Scotland proves to be insufficient, I take it that, under the principle of no fear or favour, you will certainly say to the Government that you need more time to do the job adequately, given the challenges that exist.

Professor Scott: I will not demand extra personal resources, but I would certainly be prepared to take on more time. Equally, I need to be realistic. I have other responsibilities and other fixed points in my diary that I have to keep to. However, I have certainly accepted that the work is a major commitment, and I think of it as a kind of half-time commitment.

Ross Greer: My question might sound quite broad, but will you elaborate a little on the definition of "fair access" that you will work with? I know that the National Union of Students Scotland has raised a concern about that.

Professor Scott: That is a very broad question. There are many dimensions of fairness, and to some extent they come into conflict with one another. It is clear that it is unfair that, because of their social situation, people are categorically disadvantaged in respect of having a hope of participating in higher education. Equally, it is unfair if other people are excluded as a result of encouraging those people to participate more. Therefore, there are many dimensions of fairness.

One way that I can contribute is by encouraging a very open and frank debate about precisely what "fairness" means. If it was a simple matter, I think that we would have found a solution a long time ago. We have to work at that in many dimensions.

Ross Greer: One concern that NUS Scotland raised was about the balance between getting more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds into university and the issue that has already been raised in this meeting in relation to parity of esteem between further, higher and vocational education, breaking down privilege, and the idea that further education and vocational education are somehow lesser than higher education. How do you see the balance in your work between getting more disadvantaged young people into university and creating parity of esteem between the levels of education?

Professor Scott: I prefer to emphasise higher education rather than universities. Colleges in Scotland make a very important and substantial contribution to the delivery of higher education, and that should be preserved. Many people south of the border might feel that the pendulum has swung too far, that universities have become too dominant an element, and that that has added to a potential downgrading of more vocationally orientated institutions, although the universities are, of course, very vocationally orientated. It is about access to higher education rather than access to universities. We should respect the contribution that colleges make, which in many ways is appropriate.

We should be worried if it appears that the social composition of the student body in universities is very different from that in colleges, but members would find that the social composition of the more traditional universities in England is very different from that of the post-1992 universities, which, of course, represent a much larger section of the university sector in England than they do in Scotland. We should be concerned that there are no barriers. Equally, we should not say that the only desirable outcome is an honours degree from a university. Higher education has many other desirable outcomes.

Ross Greer: On that cultural point, in some situations and some sections of society, parents would see their child getting a higher national diploma or a higher national certificate as a lesser achievement than their getting an honours degree. How do you perceive your role in shifting that culture?

Professor Scott: The major thing that I can do is not to focus too strongly on just the universities' contribution and to give greater recognition to what colleges can and do deliver without in any way diminishing the ease of articulation or transfer from one type of institution to the other, if that is appropriate. It might be appropriate to transfer in the other direction on certain occasions—who knows? The issue is very difficult, and the amount that one person can contribute to changing a culture always has to be limited.

11:45

Daniel Johnson: I will start with a supplementary to the questions on contextualised admissions. You said that there is a need to make things plainer for learners and, indeed, for them to know whether they have the required grades, and that the danger is that contextualised admissions make things more obscure. Can you elaborate on what you think needs to happen to make things plainer for learners?

Professor Scott: All universities publish tariffs for each subject in terms of the required UCAS points for entry, but in practice universities vary those and, to a degree, take into account prior educational experience and social circumstances. Traditionally, they might have taken into account other things that might even have intensified privilege, rather than diminishing it.

It is important that people understand the factors that will be taken into account—but not in order

then to aggressively play the system in terms of their own CV, although that is of course a risk. The point is that they should have full knowledge of the factors that might be taken into account and the weight that might be attached to them, which I think is fair to people. It is also fair that someone who has achieved higher grades but does not get a university place is helped to understand that the university chose another person who apparently had lower tariff points than they did because other factors were taken into account. It is therefore fair on both sides to know the factors that are taken into account.

The factors that can be taken into account will vary between institutions and subjects. Frankly, there are some subjects for which prior, detailed educational experience in quite a technical sense is absolutely required, but there are other subjects for which that is less necessary. However, it is important to bring all of that out so that the person who is applying to university has a better understanding of how their application will be judged. I suspect that the situation is often pretty opaque now, apart from UCAS points.

Daniel Johnson: That is absolutely right. I look forward to seeing future work on that.

You mentioned in your written submission the need to look at what is happening in other parts of the UK. The critical starting point of the recent Diamond review in Wales was to look at students having sustainable levels of income while they are studying, which I think is quite interesting and a different approach. What lessons does the Diamond review have for us in Scotland? How much will you look into the issue of student support?

Professor Scott: That is an area that I do not particularly cover in my written submission. However, I think that the Diamond review is a very interesting experiment. To a degree, a change of policy was forced on the Welsh Government because its policy of subsidising fees was probably not financially sustainable and led to what appeared to be a large outflow of resources to English institutions—as you can imagine, Welsh institutions, which felt that they should have benefited from the policy, objected to that. There were therefore particular circumstances around why the Welsh Government's previous approach needed to be modified.

The emphasis on student support, rather than higher fees with fee waivers and loans, as in England, or free tuition, as applies in Scotland, is nevertheless interesting. My instinct is that there is no one right model. In a way, it is useful to be able to look across the United Kingdom at different ways of approaching the issue and their potentially different impacts on fair access.

However, to return to one of the points that I made in my written submission, inequality of access reflects much deeper cultural and social factors. Regardless of the funding arrangements that there might be or whether student numbers are capped, those inequalities of access persist and need to be addressed.

The experience in England has been that approaching the matter purely in terms of financial incentives by providing bursaries to students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds is often an intervention that comes too late; that we need to address the issues much earlier; and that outreach activities, bridging programmes and summer schools—all the things that we talked about earlier—are more effective than financial incentives. Equally, we should make sure, of course, that there are no financial barriers to participation, as far as possible.

Daniel Johnson: I agree with that set of assumptions. A wide range of factors are in play, but affordability is a very important one. On that basis, what role do you see, or what discussions have you had, with regard to your participation in the student support review that has been announced?

Professor Scott: I know that one of the recommendations in the commission's report was that work on the impact of student funding and support on fair access should be commissioned within, I think, three months. My instinct today is that it might be premature to rush into that, although it is clearly an extremely important factor.

Daniel Johnson: What impact does the prospect of student debt have in terms of perceptions and encouraging—or otherwise—people to go to university?

Professor Scott: We could say that we are engaged in a gigantic experiment in relation to that south of the border. Of course, people in Scotland and Wales graduate with levels of debt. They are lower than they would be in England, but they still exist.

We still have a rather insecure understanding of perceptions of debt, particularly among younger people. So far, the evidence is that, for many young people, debt is perhaps not as intimidating a prospect as it probably was for me when I was younger. I think that circumstances change in that respect. We need a better understanding of perceptions of debt among different social groups. Some people are probably more ready to accept and not worry about debt—they see how it might be funded and paid back. For other people, perhaps because they lack that self-confidence, it is a much more intimidating prospect.

I think that it is much more about perceptions of debt. Equally, however, I do not think that it is fair

to expect someone who graduates from university to already have, in effect, a second mortgage to pay.

Ross Thomson: Daniel Johnson has touched on the majority of the issues that I was going to ask about. I have the Diamond report here, and I met Sir Ian Diamond recently. I will not cover the same ground as Daniel Johnson, but the report is clear that a move from the tuition fee grant to improved maintenance support arrangements for undergraduate students—particularly those with the highest level of grant support covering the full maintenance costs, or all their living costs—could help to support the widening of access as well as retention. Will you reflect on that as part of your annual report?

We are looking to learn from best practice across the UK but, rather than that just being something that is covered in this committee, will it be something that you reflect on as you proceed and as you report back to Government?

Professor Scott: Yes. I agree that that is the key aspect. I am sorry if I am being a bit tentative. It is simply because I do not want to claim understanding that I do not currently have, and that is probably the area where I have most to learn.

Comparisons across the UK are valuable, and I will certainly keep in touch with others. I already know and have met my approximate equivalent in England—the director of the Office for Fair Access, who is a former colleague. As far as possible, I will share any lessons that can be learnt from England, as I will in the case of Wales. As I said, the Diamond review has been an extremely interesting experiment, though it is at a very early stage. It might yield very interesting information as well, so I will certainly address that topic in my annual report.

Ross Thomson: Something about the report that was quite interesting was the reaction from students, who seemed to welcome a lot of the suggestions.

You pre-empted one of my questions in your response to Liz Smith. I take it that it is a genuine commitment that, when you feel that perhaps policy is not always achieving the objectives that it is set of it, you will be fairly robust in highlighting that to Parliament.

Professor Scott: Yes. I am very determined to maintain my independence. All that I can say is that if the Scottish Government has any doubt on that count, it has not done its preparatory work satisfactorily, because I have a reputation for being independent. Equally, I hope that I will be sensitive. I think that my role should be challenging, but also very supportive and very respectful of the work that is currently being done.

The Convener: Gillian Martin, do you have a supplementary question?

Gillian Martin: Would you say that the task that you have before you has surely been made significantly easier, given that Scottish students who want to go to university do not have the burden of potential debt from having to pay student fees, and that that is one barrier that has been removed that has had an effect on the people who we are trying to target on getting into university?

Professor Scott: Sorry, could you rephrase that slightly?

Gillian Martin: Yes. You are dealing with widening access in a country that does not put the burden of paying tuition fees on its higher education students. Would you agree that that will make the widening access agenda easier to achieve?

Professor Scott: I would say that, in very broad historical terms, providing free tuition does, on balance, produce fairer access, but it is by no means a simple equation. It would be a great mistake for anyone to conclude—and I do not think that anyone in Scotland is concluding this—that simply because tuition for Scottish students is free, that has somehow solved the problem. There are many other issues that have other sources. However, I have no doubt that that is the right starting point.

I have to say that, regardless of my own personal views, that is—and has to be—the starting point, because it is the policy of the Scottish Government, and it has been so under different political administrations since it was established. In practice, it would be very difficult to move to a different kind of system.

Conversely—and sadly, I would say—it would be quite difficult now, in England, to unscramble, or retreat from, a system that is dependent on charging high tuition fees. One has to accept that political reality. As far as my personal beliefs are concerned, I think that the Scottish approach is much more likely to promote fair access in the longer term than the approach of the UK Government acting as an English Government is.

The Convener: Your last two answers pleased me no end, as you talked about independence and about an English Government. Sorry, I am abusing my position as convener. Sorry, Liz Smith.

Johann Lamont has a question.

Johann Lamont: You said two things in your opening contribution and in your submission that I welcomed. The first was to put the issue in the context of two children, one of whom had been born with opportunity. Although that opportunity is not guaranteed, the reality is that, for too many of

our children, their life chances are determined by the time that they are five. I hope that, while that issue might not be in your remit, you will continue to have it in your head, because it is so important in terms of Government policy more generally. That issue is not going to be sorted by some kind of system of making it fairer for the ones who actually manage to get through the process, but by recognising that we lose so much potential all the way through the system.

The second thing that I welcomed was that you said that your work would be evidence led. It is my contention that education policy in Scotland and evidence-led policy are completely different things. I hope that you will recognise that. We have just heard about that, around the question of tuition fees.

I note your personal view and what you have said. I wonder whether you would look at what might be the unintended consequences of the tuition fees policy. If you look at the evidence, you see that, first, the universities tell us that the policy is underfunded. Secondly, it is cross-subsidised, fortunately, from students coming from across the border who pay fees. Thirdly, it is rationed by a quarter—there is a cap on the system. I am told that it is more difficult for a young person in Scotland to go to university now than it was five or 10 years ago precisely because of our funding system—and the system has the consequence of cuts to college education.

12:00

Do you have a role in looking at that evidence and saying, "If you want to call it free education, you are going to have to either put more money in or, if the resources remain the same, recognise that there is a balance to be struck"?

Professor Scott: Yes, I think that to some degree I can make those points. Equally, I have to—and I do—accept that those are political decisions, and that the Scottish Government has to establish its own priorities and has been elected on that basis.

I, naturally, would argue for increased expenditure on higher education and education more generally, but I am very aware that the national health service or other areas might be a greater priority. Therefore, although additional resources would be very welcome, realistically we always have to accept that there is going to be some limit on what resources are available and that the priorities affecting choices are ultimately political ones.

You mentioned the cap on student numbers. I know that there is quite a focus on that in Scotland and the impact that it might have in terms of displacing Scottish students. I have tried to emphasise that, in a sense, there are always going to be constraints on capacity in any system. Issues such as displacement can, notionally and logically, arise in all circumstances.

I also should point out that the cap on student numbers in England has only been fully removed this year. It is very early days to see how that will work. We should not imagine that simply removing the cap, or raising it significantly, will solve all our problems of fair access. However, I absolutely accept that we need additional resources and, if I feel that it is appropriate, I will make that argument.

Johann Lamont: The argument is about how resources are shared. Of course the capacity is there; it is simply that Scottish students cannot get those places because of the way in which the tuition fee policy operates. I should add that our young people are the most indebted. Disadvantaged students in Scotland are more indebted than those in other parts of the United Kingdom.

You say that that is a political decision. Is it not your job to challenge political decisions that are not evidence based? There might be contention around what I have said about the evidence. However, is it not your job to say to the Scottish Government that, although it is describing a policy as free tuition, that policy has consequences, particularly for access, as I would contend? Is it not your job to say, "You may want to make that political decision, but you will make it in the knowledge that it is contrary to a policy of fair access and opportunity"?

Professor Scott: Certainly my response would be to point out the consequences of both the student cap and the level of overall funding. However, the decision lies elsewhere. It is certainly correct that I should point out the consequences and the evidence that supports the conclusions that I have reached.

Johann Lamont: I suppose that what I am keen to hear from you is a recognition that a decision ought not to have the credibility of the label of free education if it has consequences for access and runs counter to what we are looking at. I want to hear that, rather than you simply saying, "That is not a matter for me; it is a decision for Government".

Professor Scott: I certainly should look across the wide range of policies. I ended my written statement by saying that Government should try to make all policies access proof. Even if the area appears to be comparatively remote from entry to higher education, we should try to make some assessment of what the implications, whether positive or negative, might be in relation to fair access. I certainly think that it is my responsibility

to try to increase in all areas of the Scottish Government a sensitivity to the impact of its policies as far as fair access is concerned.

Johann Lamont: To be fair, I think that everyone here will want to be in a position to support what you have said about valuing higher education for everyone and the difficulty of seeing how that fits in with the tuition fees policy.

I have one last wee question on access. Will you be looking at the necessity of having a four-year degree in Scotland in light of the view of many young people that the first year at university is similar to the sixth year at school?

Professor Scott: It would be very bold of me to suggest a total reconstruction of the pattern of undergraduate education in Scotland. After all, we should recognise that Scotland's approach is standard across Europe and the world; it is England and Wales that are exceptional in having a shorter undergraduate degree.

However, I accept that one needs to ensure that any overlap between the final year of school and the first year at university is managed sensibly. There might be instances of high-performing students being given some form of advanced standing, for example.

In general, the four-year degree course gives Scotland a flexibility that is not available in England, where the range of possibilities is rather narrow. That said, that flexibility has not always been used, certainly in relation to articulation. My understanding is that roughly half the students with higher nationals who transfer to university are given no credit or advanced standing at all. In England, the proportion is rather lower, despite the fact that students might be coming into the final year of a degree programme rather than into year three. Therefore, managing articulation should be easier in Scotland than it is in England, where the degree programme is shorter.

Therefore, I think that one should encourage a degree of flexibility, in a limited number of circumstances perhaps, by allowing some form of advanced standing, even for first-entry students from school; and I think that that flexibility should certainly be used to improve articulation and to make it more common. However, I do not think that it would be sensible for me to recommend any wholesale changes in that respect. On the whole, it is a great advantage that should be used more commonly than it is.

Liz Smith: I wonder whether I can get some clarification on that. Notwithstanding the different views on higher education funding—I am not asking about that difference of perspective—do you, with your title of commissioner for fair access, believe that a problem in the current system lies in the different categories of students, whether they be domiciled Scots, European or international students or rest-of-UK students? Do the students in those different categories have different perspectives on the payments that they make to universities? After all, some are paid for by their Governments, while others use their own means. I am not asking for your views on the future of higher education funding, but does that issue concern you from a fair access point of view?

Moreover, to take up Johann Lamont's point, I wonder whether you think that there is a knock-on effect on the competitive edge for places as a result of the capped system, which does not exist for some students. Will you look at that aspect?

Professor Scott: Yes, I certainly think that we should be frank about that. As I have said in my written submission, this is not a new problem; in a sense, it has existed for at least half a century in relation to students from outside the European Union. I agree, though, that a new dimension of complexity has been created by the different decisions that the UK and Scottish Governments have taken on tuition fees, which produce areas of potential controversy and complexity in relation to fair access.

I see the primary responsibility of my role—and I think that this was the prime focus of the commission—as being to focus on fair access for Scotland-domiciled students. I do not think that I have any remit to make access fairer for students who come from England or Wales to attend Scottish institutions, although I accept that the social composition of those students changes the flavour and affects the culture of at least some Scottish universities.

Colin Beattie: NUS Scotland provided figures for the committee. It told us:

> "our ancient universities account for only 6% of students from the most deprived backgrounds moving from college to university",

and that

> "of those 113 students, 91 are made to start over again in first year ... A further 10 are made to duplicate a year of study".

Does that seem fair?

Professor Scott: On the face of it, it is not fair, but we must always start from where we are, rather than where we should be. I think that we would find a very similar pattern at the most famous American universities or at Oxford and Cambridge. On the whole, there would be a limited number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, despite the great efforts that those institutions make to search for such students and to welcome and support them when they enter the institution.

Rather than comment in detail on specific universities, I make the general point that it is important that the institutions that have the most socially privileged intakes have a leadership role. It is not appropriate to say that fair access will be taken care of by the post-1992 universities or the colleges; the responsibility is for the whole sector. Indeed, in a way, Edinburgh and St Andrews—or whatever institutions you have in mind—might have a heightened responsibility to exercise leadership in that area.

I have to say that those universities make major efforts. I was in St Andrews last week, talking to the new principal, and the university had organised a conference to bring together people from across Scotland who are concerned with fair access. I was impressed by the new principal's personal commitment in that regard, and I know that St Andrews has some quite interesting programmes.

I would not expect everyone to approach fair access in the same way, but the statistic that you gave is alarming.

Colin Beattie: NUS Scotland also said:

"Overall, across all institutions, 51% of articulating students are forced to repeat years of study".

That seems a high proportion.

Professor Scott: It seems a high proportion to me, too. I think that it is higher than the proportion in England, as I said, despite the fact that England has a shorter degree programme.

There are two areas of concern in that regard: one is for the individual student, who prolongs their education, which leads to issues of debt, worry about entering the labour market and so on. Such issues are worse for students who are forced unnecessarily to prolong their education. Secondly, it is a waste to duplicate a funded place that could have been available to another student.

I think that more could be done to improve the situation. Universities sometimes start from the position that a higher national student is guilty until proved innocent—it has to be proved that the experience that they had in their two years articulates sufficiently well with the university programme for them to be allowed on to it. We should try to shift that round, so that on the whole the student is regarded as innocent until proved guilty: the starting point should be that they are given advanced standing and appropriate credit unless there are compelling educational reasons, in relation to particular subjects, why that would not be appropriate—of course, there will be midway positions, too.

12:15

Colin Beattie: In the interest of fairness, is that an area that you would very much be looking at?

Professor Scott: Yes. I would have expected Scotland's performance on articulation between colleges and universities to be superior to that of other parts of the United Kingdom, but it appears to be rather less good. It is an area that one could work on.

Colin Beattie: Organisations such as the NUS say that articulation is a success story. Clearly, though, there are other issues behind it that perhaps need to be addressed in the interests of widening access and fairness.

Professor Scott: Yes, I agree.

Fulton MacGregor: I welcome you to your new post, Professor Scott, and I wish you well going forward.

We have had an interesting discussion today and a lot of points have been covered, but I have a question for you that I put to the previous panel. For me, this issue is about ensuring that people have choices. I think that it was Tavish Scott who made the point that there is perhaps almost an obsession with university and college education, or further education as a whole. However, I would like to see young people across the country having choices and feeling that, whatever they choose, they are on an even keel with others. You have talked about that issue in your responses to questions from different members, but what is your view generally on that?

Professor Scott: You are right that we should not indicate that there are standard ways of achieving success and that there are routes that are inherently less successful. I would certainly resist very strongly any suggestion that a college experience or its courses and qualifications are somehow inferior to a university experience—such a suggestion would be wrong. The key, though, is to ensure that people have the correct information to make choices. To level the playing field, people should start from the same position and have the same chance—or reasonably similar chances—of the choices that they would like to make being realistic ones for them to follow. It would be very unfortunate if in the process of pursuing fair access, the choices available to people were narrowed down.

In future, my guess is that there will be a proliferation of different pathways that students might follow, including apprenticeship modes of various kinds—there will be a much more diverse range of pathways for people to follow; so fair access should not be narrowed down too much so that success is achieved in a particular way.

Fulton MacGregor: Do you have any plans to do work with the business community on, for example, the modern apprenticeship scheme? Is it on your radar to do anything like that?

Professor Scott: It certainly should be on my radar. As I said, I think that I should try to resist as far as possible seeing fair access simply in terms of access to universities and perhaps particular kinds of university. That is important, but it is only one aspect of fair access. As you said, fair access is about trying as far as possible to respect the choices that students might make if they are following less traditional routes. This is not at all a criticism of the commission on widening access's report, which I think is a wonderful document in most respects, but it is focused very strongly on younger initial entrants, and the situations of mature or adult students and part-time students, who because of their circumstances need to study in a more flexible way, also need to be addressed.

I need to try to cover as much as possible, but I also need to be realistic. Clearly, there are certain agendas on which people wish to see progress. The Scottish Government has established some targets and the funding council has established, in effect, targets for institutions to meet—outcome agreements. However, we should not be too constrained by such targets; we should try to see fair access in a very broad and open kind of way.

Fulton MacGregor: I appreciate that those were very broad questions and I acknowledge that you are just in post. I genuinely look forward to you coming back before the committee at some point in the future, when you have had more time to develop in the role. I will be keenly interested to see how things are going.

Professor Scott: I am clear that I am offering very general answers to questions for which the answers should be much more specific. I need to think hard, certainly in the first year, about the areas that I should focus on. I would hope to determine three or four areas to focus on and make that publicly known. However, I would not want to lose a sense of the need to encourage a debate about what fair access means.

The Convener: Thank you, Professor Scott. I am sure that when we have you back before the committee, we will ask you questions about those areas of interest.

That concludes the public session. I thank Professor Scott for his time and evidence, and I wish him well in his new post.

12:21

Meeting continued in private until 12:31.

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