Equalities
and Human Rights Committee

Thursday 2 November 2017

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 2 November 2017

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EQUALITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE
25th Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)
*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
*David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
*Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Carol Baverstock (University of Aberdeen)
Fiona Burns (Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council)
Ann Duncan (University of Strathclyde)
Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)
Dr John Kemp (Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council)
Kirsty Knox (University of the West of Scotland)
Professor Sir Peter Scott (Commissioner for Fair Access)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Claire Menzies

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Equalities and Human Rights Committee

Thursday 2 November 2017

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Tribute

The Deputy Convener (Alex Cole-Hamilton): Good morning and welcome to the 25th meeting in 2017 of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee. I ask everybody to switch their phones to silent mode, and I say to our guests that they do not need to press their buttons to operate the microphones—the audio tech guys will do that directly.

I have a few announcements to make before we get into the substance of today's meeting. We have received apologies from our convener, Christina McKelvie, who will not be able to attend today's meeting or meetings for the next few weeks for health reasons. As deputy convener, I will convene meetings in her absence. I am sure that I speak for the whole committee and its staff when I say that I wish her a speedy recovery. I welcome Linda Fabiani as a substitute member of the committee.

Before we move on to our first item of business, I would like to take a few moments to acknowledge the very sad passing of Ian Methven, one of the official reporters who support our committee. Along with his colleague Simon Eilbeck, Ian attended our meetings each week to assist with the transcription of our proceedings. Ian was one of the longest serving members of the official report. He joined the Scottish Parliament with the original group of staff back in 1999. During one of the first committee meetings of the Parliament back in June 1999, the convener of the committee in question decided to introduce all the support staff by reading their names into the record. When he turned to the official report staff, there was some debate as to whether reporters should remain anonymous. One committee member playfully remarked that official report staff

"do not have time to have names, they just write."—[*Official Report, Procedures Committee*, 22 June 1999; c 16.]

The convener did read the names of both official report staff present that day into the record, and one of them was Ian. All of us know that Ian and his colleagues in the official report do so much more than "just write".

Like his colleagues, Ian dedicated his career to making the Scottish Parliament a success. He worked daily to deliver the founding principles of this Parliament to be open, accessible and accountable to the people of Scotland through his high-quality reporting work. That work has earned Ian and his official report colleagues the respect of all of us in this place.

I know that it will be very difficult for Ian's colleagues to transcribe these words into the very *Official Report* that Ian worked so hard to produce. However, just as our predecessors did 18 years ago, I think that it is fitting that we acknowledge Ian's quiet and steadfast contribution to the work of the Scottish Parliament by reading his name into the record again here today.

On behalf of the convener, Christina McKelvie, and all the members and staff of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, I offer our sincere condolences to Ian's wife Elizabeth and his family, and to his professional family and friends in the official report and across the Parliament, who are grieving his untimely loss.

I should add that Simon Eilbeck of the official report has asked that we record the thanks of the official report to the committee for that tribute.

Draft Budget Scrutiny 2018-19

09:33

The Deputy Convener: Our first item of business is to begin our scrutiny of the Scottish Government's draft budget for 2018-19. Today, we look back at the recommendations that we made in our report on last year's draft budget on disabled students and British Sign Language users applying to and studying at Scottish universities. The aim of today's session is to assess the progress that is being made in implementing our report.

Today's evidence session will therefore have BSL interpretation, which will be provided for people in the public gallery and for those watching online. I thank the BSL interpreters and welcome them to the meeting. I ask committee members and the members of the today's panels to consider the interpreters and to try to speak slowly, where possible.

I welcome to the committee Professor Sir Peter Scott, the commissioner for fair access to higher education in Scotland; and, from the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, Dr John Kemp, who is the interim chief executive, and Fiona Burns, who is assistant director, outcome agreement manager and access policy lead. I remind you that you do not need to switch on your microphones, as that will be done for you.

I start by asking the commissioner a general open question. You have been in post for 10 months now. How have you have spent that time?

Professor Sir Peter Scott (Commissioner for Fair Access): I have spent that time on three main things, the first of which is familiarising myself with Scottish education. I have always been very familiar with the universities, but a bit less so with the colleges and less so again in relation to schools. I have therefore taken every opportunity to visit institutions, accept invitations that I have been given, give talks and meet people generally. Everyone has been generous with their time, which has been very helpful to me.

Secondly, I decided that it would be a mistake simply to concentrate all my efforts on producing one annual report—one shot a year, so to speak—and that it is important to try to maintain a debate about issues of fair access. Therefore, we are publishing on the commissioner's website a number of discussion documents on key themes. There have been two so far, a third is about to come out and two more are in preparation. The discussion documents present all the data and evidence in a form that is as accessible as possible, because I would like them to be read very widely; they are also as objective as possible,

because I realise that they sometimes raise issues on which there are different opinions. Separately from the data and the evidence, I have included a commentary written by me that inevitably expresses views. However, people can separate that quite clearly from the data and the evidence, and they can take my views or leave them, depending on what they think.

Thirdly, I have been preparing my first annual report, which is due at the end of the year. As it is my first report, I decided that it should be relatively comprehensive and cover not only all the key issues, many of which will be familiar to members of the committee, but some of the big controversial issues. I do not think that I should shy away from those; I believe that they should be openly debated in a democratic society. As there has not been a commissioner before and this is the first such report, I am literally starting with a blank sheet of paper, which has been quite a challenge.

Those are the three major things that I have been spending my time on, but I would emphasise the first: visiting institutions and getting to know people in the sector.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. I am sure that my colleagues and I will come back to you with specific questions about your work and remit.

I turn to the funding council witnesses. I thank you for coming and, in particular, for your submission. It is clear that you found a synergy with the committee's views and the work that we have done on widening access to universities, particularly with regard to BSL and the wider disabled community. You seem quite open to our recommendations. Can you give us a flavour of how you intend to take that work forward following this session and, indeed, in light of the committee's wider work?

Dr John Kemp (Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council): First, I am glad that you see that there is a synergy between the committee's recommendations and what we have seen as important for universities in particular to deliver. As you can see, that has very much fed into our guidance on outcome agreements.

We intend to take our work forward primarily through an intensification of the outcome agreements. We came to the committee in December last year and the committee's report came out in the early part of this year. We have only just put out the guidance on the next set of outcome agreements, but in the time between the publication of the committee's report and the guidance going out we worked quite closely on how to intensify the outcome agreement process. The process was introduced relatively recently and it has been on an improvement trajectory. We are keen to intensify that improvement and ensure that

it increasingly delivers the outcomes as quickly as possible. We will feed our work into that process so that we are very clear with the universities about what we all see as important for them to deliver.

The Deputy Convener: Would Fiona Burns like to add anything?

Fiona Burns (Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council): No, I do not have anything to add.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Good morning, panel. Professor Scott, I would like to have more of an insight into your role. Where are you based?

Professor Scott: I am not based in Scotland as I have a day job in London. Officially, I devote three to five days a month to this role, although in practice I devote more time to it than that. When I am in Scotland, either I come here to Edinburgh or I go to Glasgow. I probably go to Glasgow more often than I come to Edinburgh, unless it is for an occasion such as this.

Gail Ross: In your three to five days a month—I have no doubt that you spend a lot more time on the role than that—what have you concentrated on so far in relation to widening access?

Professor Scott: I have been concentrating on the targets that were recommended by the commission on widening access, which the Government accepted. In particular, I have concentrated on the 20 per cent target, which is that, in 2030, 20 per cent of students in higher education should come from the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland, which is a very bold ambition. I have also concentrated on the interim targets and the specific institutional targets.

I have always been mindful that disadvantage comes in many forms and, as I said in my written submission, I have always been committed to the needs of adult and part-time students. Disabled students are another important group to suffer disadvantage.

While focusing on the formal targets that have been set, it is important that we pay attention to the wider range of disadvantages and see them as a whole set, because people sometimes suffer multiple forms of disadvantage. For example, when they enter higher education, many disabled young people have other forms of deficit that need to be addressed because their needs have not been adequately met at earlier stages in the education system.

Disadvantage comes in many forms but, as I said, my initial focus has had to be on the targets.

Gail Ross: It is a huge remit. Is three to five days a month enough?

Professor Scott: It depends very much on how the role is seen. At the moment, I stand a bit outside the system, of which I am an observer, a commentator and a critical friend, and I do not have any executive or regulatory functions. It is probably a good model; nevertheless, I am aware of the demands on my time.

I have to accept that, because I am the first commissioner, this is a work in progress. I am sure that the time for me to make a more definitive statement about whether the role works as it is currently constructed or whether it needs to be changed will probably be after two years—I have now been reappointed for another year.

Gail Ross: You touched on your annual report, which is due out at the end of this year. Will you include in the report issues relating to students who are disabled and BSL users?

Professor Scott: I have to admit that they will not be covered in any detail, although there will be a section in my annual report that looks at other forms of disadvantage, as opposed to those that are measured by the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. There will certainly be mentions of disabled students in the report, but those will not go into detail at this stage and not into as much detail as your report did.

Having said that, I mentioned the discussion documents that we have published, and we are planning a future discussion document that will look at the other forms of disadvantage—age and gender will be included, disability will certainly be one and ethnicity might be another—focus attention on them and build a broader agenda for the future.

09:45

Gail Ross: Finally, how do you expect to support the Scottish funding council and other partners on fair access for students who are disabled and BSL users?

Professor Scott: I suppose that it is the other way round—I envisage them supporting me. John Kemp and his colleagues have been very generous with their offers, and if there are areas that I need to investigate further or on which we need better research evidence, they are certainly prepared to help me provide that evidence. We have established a good working relationship, and I am very happy about that.

Inevitably, because I have a degree of independence, I perhaps have a right to be a bit more forthright than the funding council can be. I am not sure whether John Kemp and his colleagues will welcome that, but I certainly think that part of my role is to push the boundaries of debate a little bit further.

Dr Kemp: The support is very much mutual. We value Professor Scott's advice. Our access and inclusion committee has engaged with him, and he spoke at our access conference earlier in the year.

However, there is often a role for challenging us, and Professor Scott's annual report should challenge the Government, the SFC and the institutions with regard to where they are in delivering on priorities. Moreover, with his experience in this area, he also plays what I find is a very valuable support role, and it is useful to bounce ideas off him and have him help join up bits of the system and see things slightly from afar. We are often very much in the middle of discussions with universities on detailed issues, and the slightly more helicopter view that he can bring from the outside and his being able to say that something is good enough, or not good enough, can help quite a bit.

The Deputy Convener: As a supplementary to Gail Ross's line of questioning, I want to say first that it is great to have you in post, commissioner. A number of times during the inquiry, people referred to your position, hoping that issues would be sorted by the commissioner for fair access.

However, I have one concern that arises from your submission. You have rightly focused on getting students from SIMD areas into higher education, but you also recognise that BSL users and disabled people comprise a new seam that you need to tap into. I ask on behalf of the committee that, as you move forward, you reflect on whether you have sufficient time for your work, and that, if you need more, you come back and ask us to lobby for your having more time to devote to work on this area. After all, it is a big area—we were surprised at just how big it was.

Witnesses in our inquiry highlighted other institutions that might be getting access right; indeed, the University of Central Lancashire was seen as a centre of excellence for BSL users. To what extent is your role about disseminating not only best practice between institutions in the British Isles but best practice from further afield and internationally?

Professor Scott: It is certainly important that I take a very broad view. Just yesterday, a very interesting and detailed report commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies on models of support for students with disabilities was published. That report, which I read with a lot of interest, covers the governance and budgetary arrangements for supporting disabled students; the actual organisations and support services; the idea of inclusive provision to ensure that disabled students are not excluded in any way; and, inevitably, the monitoring and evaluation of those initiatives.

It would be good if we could look more broadly at what is happening in Europe, although I am less familiar with official documents there. After all, this is an issue that we all have in common. There has always been the risk of disability being seen as a problem for the students themselves—in other words, we see students as having disabilities. However, the problem really needs to be turned the other way round so that the problem is our perception of them and our ability to accommodate their needs. It is very important that institutions see things in that proactive way. As you said, many institutions do that already. There is plenty of good practice to draw on.

The Deputy Convener: I believe that Mary Fee has a supplementary question on that.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Yes. My question is about access to universities through the application process. We have heard in evidence that there is a very standardised application process and that some students with disabilities have difficulty going through it because there is one format. One university said to us that it would take applications

"in alternative formats where that is considered to be an appropriate adjustment".

The use of that language gives me some concern. The university pushed back to say that it should be the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service that looks at different types of application process.

My question is particularly for Professor Scott. Would you be able to look at that issue and make specific recommendations on it? The application process seems to be the automatic place to go to in order to open access to young people with disabilities.

Professor Scott: There are two aspects to that, one of which is that UCAS, which you mentioned, is a United Kingdom-wide body, and the procedures that it adopts would have to be negotiated across the whole of the UK. The other is the way in which individual universities would use the applications and any supplementary material that they might need.

You have made a very fair point. I cannot claim any great expertise on the admission forms and how user friendly they are for a disabled student. I know that universities make major efforts on accommodation and access to lectures and tutorials, for example, to accommodate the needs of disabled people when they have become students, but you have made a very important point. The students have to be there in the first place and, if an unnecessary barrier has been created, that will obviously be highly undesirable.

There is no lack of good will but, with a distributed system in which some responsibility

lies with UCAS, some lies with the individual university, and some lies between the admissions office in the university and individual departments that take decisions on admitting particular students, there is at least scope for some kind of buck passing. It is not clear where the responsibility is. One of the major points that were made in the report to the English funding council that I just mentioned was that there should be champions and a single source in institutions where those things are decided.

Dr Kemp: I agree with the point that Peter Scott has just made. There should be a single source. I would be concerned if too much was done at the individual institution level and there was too much different practice in different institutions. Most students who apply through UCAS apply to more than one institution, and there is a very standardised UK system. One of the challenges that we found in other aspects of the application system, particularly in contextualised admissions, was students not knowing how their application would be treated and what special cases would be taken into account. That will often not be said, and an application might be unsuccessful; if it is down to the institution taking those things into account or not, the potential student might not know that.

The more that is done through the formal UCAS system, the better, but the challenge is that UCAS is a very big, UK-wide, slick system that is quite hard to tweak. That makes quick change more difficult. In the long run, that approach is probably better for potential students in that there is transparency and clarity about the system and what kinds of things will be taken into account, which might not happen if things are done at the institutional level. That said, there are special cases at the institutional level that we would want to see institutions react to, as well. It is important to get the balance right.

Fiona Burns: I want to provide a bit of reassurance about the BSL national plan. The Scottish funding council has been asked to set up a steering group, which we are in the process of doing. It will include and be led by BSL users. The point of informing you about that is to say that UCAS is aware of the issue. We have regular updates and meetings with UCAS, and it is aware that that area of work is coming up. It will more than likely be a key member of that group, to take forward the very points that you raised.

The Deputy Convener: I believe that Linda Fabiani has a supplementary question on that.

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): Yes—it is directly related to that. I first want to say that, as a substitute member on the committee, I have not been involved in much of the discussion. However, when I read Mr Scott's submission, the thing that jumped out at me was point 8, which is on the committee's recommendation on the connection between the institutions' equality commitments and the outcome agreements with the Scottish funding council. I thought that that was an interesting recommendation, and you agreed with it, Mr Scott. I would like to have both sides' views on how that could work. I can see the need for it, and I can buy into the idea that we need to change the culture in institutions, which is also mentioned, but I have a concern, which applies across many institutional walks of life. When we set up something rigidly, we often end up with all the boxes ticked but no qualitative analysis of what is happening underneath that. What is your general view on that recommendation and how it could work?

Professor Scott: The specific comment that I was trying to make on outcome agreements is that they serve two purposes. They are excellent in that they try to get agreement between the institution and the funding council—and, in a sense, the public interest more broadly—about an institution's overall strategic direction and its priorities. The agreements work very well in that respect.

Outcome agreements have a second purpose, which is to monitor particular areas. Equality might be one of them, and disability and fair access more generally might be others—there will be a range of issues. It is difficult to strike the right balance between the outcome agreement being an effective overall strategy-setting document and being a monitoring document in relation to particular initiatives and programmes.

The outcome agreement is a good way in which to gain the commitment of an institution at the most senior level to take issues seriously and develop a mechanism by which culture change can take place. As you say, there is a risk that it becomes a kind of box-ticking exercise, with questions such as, "Have you assessed this programme?" or "Do you have an action plan?" The boxes might be ticked, but it is not always clear what it all adds up to.

There was an interesting article in *The Herald* recently by someone from Glasgow Clyde College—I am afraid that I should have checked the details before the meeting—who made the point that, from an institution's point of view, there often seem to be lots of different boxes, with disability in one place, the recruitment of students from areas of multiple deprivation in another and various other bits and pieces, but it is not always clear how they all add up. Ultimately, that is the responsibility of the senior leadership of the institution—the principal and his or her immediate colleagues—but at the mid-level or grass roots of an institution, it can appear to be all very separated, so it is important to work towards a

more coherent picture, which is the point that I was trying to make about being more proactive.

Dr Kemp: Outcome agreements are called that because we are keen to see shifts in the outcomes for students, on equalities and in other areas. In an ideal world, we would not need to worry about all the boxes being ticked to make sure that the institutions had a policy and had done this and that, and we would not need the separate returns and so on. However, we recognise that we are not in an ideal world. We need to keep on thinking about outcomes rather than seeing success as an institution that has a separate and beautiful glossy policy on every single aspect of equalities and which has ticked all the boxes and done all the awareness raising and this, that and the other but where the outcomes for students are still not moving. In my book, that would not be success, so we need to look at the outcomes. Where we occasionally require boxes to be ticked or policies to be included in the outcome agreement process, they need to be seen as stepping stones to changing the outcome and, if they are not doing that, they are not doing the right thing.

In the outcome agreement process, we have tried to see equalities as one big issue in which access is not just about socioeconomic access. Gender is a huge issue in universities and colleges, and it is sometimes fairly complex. We need to see all these issues as one issue and avoid a series of granular, separate policies that keep gender issues separate from social class issues, which are separate from disability issues. In reality, all these issues intersect and should be seen as part of the same challenge.

10:00

As Professor Scott said, there have been issues around the amount of reporting that is required and the number of separate reports on separate groups. We should always keep an eye on that and make sure that we are not overburdening institutions. However, we also need to make sure that they are seeking to address all the outcomes for all the different groups. It is a difficult balance to strike, but we need to keep looking at it and keep focusing on the outcomes.

Fiona Burns: Thanks to the work of this committee and the latest outcome agreement guidance, we have made a strong effort to remind institutions that the public sector equality duties are the starting point for any equality initiative or work that they are doing and that they should have gone through a strong and thorough mainstreaming process. Once they have that, they can then consider their gender action plan or anything else that they are being asked to do by the funding council or the Scottish Government and make sure that it has good intersectionality

and considers all the protected characteristics and does not just focus on gender on its own. That is not what we want to achieve.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): My question is probably relevant to Fiona Burns's final comment.

Professor Scott, in your written submission, you say that you want

"to highlight the risk that focusing too tightly on SIMD20 targets may inadvertently lead to efforts to tackle other forms of disadvantage being downgraded. In my future work I hope to be able to broaden out my work to cover all forms of disadvantage."

This might be a good time to expand on what those other forms of disadvantage might be and how you think we can combat the risk of those being lost in the narrow focus on the SIMD.

Professor Scott: I do not want to be misunderstood. I might have exaggerated. The SIMD is a good index of multiple deprivation. It is certainly superior to its equivalent in England, although that is available across the UK: the POLAR—participation of local areas—system. The SIMD is much more fine grained.

What I really had in mind is that the focus is very much on young entrants. If an institution has to focus its efforts on meeting a particular target, it will inevitably prioritise recruitment of certain groups of students and, by definition, pay less attention to other students. For example, I am aware that many people seek to enter higher education in their mid-20s. They might have caught up a bit with any deficits that they had in their school education and might have been remotivated for any number of reasons. Under the current targets, the risk is that they do not really count. That is one group.

I am very concerned about the needs of part-time study. To some degree, our definition of who is a full-time student and who is a part-time student is pretty artificial. Students increasingly want to study in more flexible ways and there is a risk that we have imposed a rather rigid template and, if you fall outside it, you do not count towards meeting the targets.

Although targets are important for measuring progress and comparative performance between institutions, they always have unintended consequences. Those are the issues that I had in mind. Of course, disability is another group that is not covered by the targets, although care-experienced students are. I am simply saying that, although one will always have to define what areas are being focused on in the short run, those areas should be kept under review because there may be other groups whose needs become more prominent and who should be more fairly reflected. Those are the ideas that I had.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Good morning, panel. I want to go down the mental health route. We know that students who disclose mental health issues have the worst outcomes. There are two areas that I want to explore in that regard. First, what is being done to create parity between the support that has been provided for those with mental health issues and the support for those with physical disabilities? How does that extend into staff training? Secondly, what is being done to encourage those who have not disclosed mental health issues to come forward and to get the support that they need at university or college?

Dr Kemp: They were quite a lot of questions in there.

Annie Wells: Yes.

Dr Kemp: The reason why we are being a bit hesitant is that the questions about staff training and so on would probably be better addressed to the universities. We have been trying to focus on the outcomes for the students which, as you say, can be particularly challenging. Fiona, do you want to talk about the outcome agreement guidance in that regard?

Fiona Burns: We monitor the situation closely. We are very aware that the group that Annie Wells mentioned has the worst outcomes; that is consistent for colleges and universities, so we are very concerned about it.

As a first step, we have been working with ARC Scotland to see whether we can work together on training. It has submitted a funding proposal to us—it has not been considered by my senior management team, but I have all my fingers and toes crossed. Training is the most impactful thing that can be done to try to help people to disclose their mental health issues and seek the help that they need as and when they require it.

We have done a lot of work in the college system in this area, which we need to replicate in the university system. I am hopeful that we will start to see a turnaround in the outcomes in the college system, because we are certainly investing heavily in the area.

We are working with anybody in the Scottish Government who works in the field. We are part of the framework for disabled young people and children and we have become involved in the disability delivery plan. We want to connect more with the Scottish Government's mental health strategy, and we have real hopes that that will start to turn things around culturally and socially, as well as within colleges and universities. We are trying to tie into other work, and I am hopeful about the training as a first point in addressing the issue that Annie Wells has raised.

Professor Scott: I will make a general comment. Disability covers a wide range of conditions, some of which are obvious and visible. Blind people, deaf people and people whose movements are restricted are clear groups—there is no difficulty in identifying them and beginning the process of meeting their needs. There are other areas, such as dyslexia among students, that we are much more conscious of nowadays and better able to deal with. Mental health is a more difficult area, because it covers a spectrum that includes people who are seriously mentally ill, for whom it becomes an issue of how universities work with the health service to deal with it. At a lower level, many university students suffer from stress and depression, which can be—but are not always—a prelude to more serious mental health conditions. Those are more difficult to identify, and there is a risk that they might be taken less seriously, but I certainly know from my conversations with students that the levels of stress and depression are emerging issues among students.

The Deputy Convener: We should pick up this topic with the next panel, too, because we need to hear from the institutions about it. We will move on.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Good morning. How are the Scottish funding council and other partners supporting the commissioner?

Dr Kemp: Well, I hope. [*Laughter.*] When Professor Scott was appointed, I met him and said, "Tell us what help you need and we'll try to deliver it." As well as the support he gets from us, he is supported by colleagues in the Government. He will probably say this, too, but he plays a dual role of not only joining things up and spreading good practice but being a critical friend. The critical friend bit is important, because he needs to report annually on how the system in Scotland is doing and how my organisation, the Government and the universities and colleges are delivering access. We therefore need to be careful that we are not supporting Professor Scott to the extent that he is not free to criticise us, and we try to strike the correct balance between being here to help him if he asks for such help and recognising that part of his role is to say whether the funding council and indeed the Government are doing enough or whether the things that they are doing are right or wrong.

We have kept our door open. If Professor Scott wants Fiona Burns and her team to work on something, we have been open to such requests, and we see the work that we do through our access and inclusion committee and our annual access conference as aligning with his work. Indeed, he has attended those forums. It would, of

course, be interesting to hear his views on the issue.

David Torrance: That was going to be my next question.

Professor Scott: I feel that I have a very good relationship with and get good support from John Kemp and his colleagues. However, as John has said, my annual report might make recommendations that, although not necessarily directly critical of the funding council, might push it in a direction that it might not particularly want to go in at that moment. I might also make recommendations to the Government and, indeed, institutions that they might feel the same about.

My role requires me to strike a balance between pushing at the frontiers all the time, trying to push thinking forward and trying, occasionally, to get people to think outside the box and to think that things that they had previously thought were not possible actually are and not being so unreasonable that my views are totally ignored. I have had a lot of experience as the head of an institution, as a board member of the Higher Education Funding Council for England and as chair of its equivalent of the Scottish funding council's access and inclusion committee, so I think that I have a good sense of the balance between being rooted in what is possible and practical and trying to be adventurous and innovative. In a sense, though, you and others will come to a judgment on that.

David Torrance: On a totally different subject, what effect will Brexit have on university applications? How will that situation pan out, what with the possible erosion of all the equality laws that we have fought for?

Dr Kemp: Are you talking about the longer-term effect of not having the underpinning of European law?

David Torrance: Yes.

Dr Kemp: It is very much for Governments in Scotland and the UK to decide what happens to the bits that are repatriated in the long term. I am not that well qualified to speculate on this area, not least because there is quite a lot of uncertainty about how and when these things will happen and what the impact will be.

However, I can say that Brexit might have a lot of impact on the university system with regard to research funding, and work is being done to try to reduce that uncertainty. Another impact relates to the fact that about 10 per cent of entrants to Scottish universities are from the rest of the European Union, excluding the UK. According to the most recent UCAS figures, that number has gone down a bit; in fact, to come back to the issue of access, it went down by almost the same

number as the increase in the number of students from the SIMD20 areas.

The situation is having a series of consequences that were not necessarily thought through as being consequences of Brexit but, as we work through this and some of the uncertainties go, some of the issues that have been raised with regard to the equality laws that we will work within will very much become a matter for the UK and Scottish Governments. At the moment, we are continuing to work within the current laws. As Fiona Burns suggested, we see equality and access as very much part of one philosophy rather than as something granular.

10:15

Mary Fee: You raise an interesting point about the loss of research funding from the European Union. This might be quite a simplistic view, but it seems to me that, if we lose the research funding, that could have a significant trickle-down effect on a number of things, including research development, applications and even job opportunities for young people in Scotland. Is that a fair point?

Dr Kemp: Yes. The research that happens in our universities through the innovation centres and so on helps to drive the economy so, if we are doing less of it, that is a bad thing. The Scottish Government and the UK Government are currently doing work to see how that can be protected. There are some schemes that the Governments could pay a subscription to be part of, and there could be other ways of replacing some of that research funding. There are a lot of uncertainties, but we are keen that our universities retain the capacity to do research and continue to have access to staff, some of whom are from Europe, to do that research.

Professor Scott: I could probably give a slightly less diplomatic answer than John Kemp, as I am more independent. Obviously, Brexit will have a series of negative consequences. A lot of our laws to do with many of the issues that relate to the work of this committee are ultimately rooted in European law. Although the plan, apparently, is to incorporate all of those laws into UK law so that things can continue for the moment, there is a risk that some of the gains that have been made as a result of European initiatives in the past 40 years might be lost. The greater risk is that that process might be rather imperceptible, as it might involve small details here and there, and it might be difficult to pick up on the larger picture. That is a general threat.

As John Kemp says, in relation to research, it would be open to the UK to continue to contribute to certain schemes, as Switzerland and Norway

do. It would make good economic sense to do that, because the UK institutions currently get substantially more out in terms of research funding than the UK puts in. However, I am not sure whether the other European countries would continue to agree to that arrangement.

The major area, of course, concerns the climate of public opinion. If the UK is seen as a more xenophobic country and as being less welcoming to people from other countries, there will be a greater reluctance on the part of other Europeans to come and make their careers here, never mind to come and be students here.

Finally, of course, there is the issue that the Scottish Government will have to face, which is that, currently, other European Union students, apart from those from the rest of the UK, are included in the cap of funded places. If they are no longer included in that, the Government will have a series of decisions about what to do with those funded places.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you for risking the wrath of the *Daily Mail*, Sir Peter. In your candour on those matters, I think that you will find synergy with many of the committee members.

As we move into our last five minutes or so with this panel, I would like us to reflect on an issue that we covered fairly extensively in our inquiry, which is the subject of contextualised admissions, whereby grades are weighted against particular social challenges that individual students might have faced. We are interested in whether those are being applied universally, whether there is consistency in how the contextualised admissions process works and whether it can be improved. Dr Kemp, perhaps you could kick off on that.

Dr Kemp: Earlier this week, the SFC published a report on that issue that we commissioned some time ago from Durham University. The report looked at how contextualised admissions are used in Scotland and what the scope is for improvement. In some ways, the report was trying to answer the very question that the deputy convener just posed, and it says that there is scope for improvement. The report provides a robust evidence base for why contextualised admissions are a way of ensuring that we get the students with the greatest talent into universities. Universities' decisions on which students to take in should be based on taking in those with the greatest talent and potential. Using contextualised admissions is a way of doing that and we want universities to use it to the fullest extent.

Some are using contextualised admissions, but many universities are nervous about how to apply the approach, because it is a controversial area. If a university has high demand for courses and has to say yes or no to applicants, doing that purely on

exam grades looks fair and transparent and is nice and easy to understand. However, if a university says that it weighs exam grades differently for different students, that will seem unfair to the students who might have higher exam grades but will find it difficult to get in. The university will need to have a robust evidence base underpinning its decision in order to explain it, but there is now an evidence base that allows that to be done.

Many universities will want to see how that applies in their context, but the evidence is sometimes hard to get because they have not admitted many students with lower entry grades. However, part of the research that we published this week gives universities that evidence. Through the outcome agreement process and discussions with universities, we will be asking them to do more on contextualised admissions because, particularly in the more selective institutions, that is a way of widening access and getting in the best talent.

Fiona Burns: Universities Scotland has done good work in the area on the back of the report of the commission on widening access and is looking at more consistent measures that could be used across the system. It is also considering a better language that could be used across the system, as it appreciates that it is difficult for parents and children to understand contextualised admissions and what that might mean for them and for individual institutions. There is therefore a direction of travel that started with the commission on widening access, which I hope is helped by the research that we have published and that will be progressed through the outcome agreement system.

Professor Scott: I support everything that has just been said, because I believe that contextualised admissions are a key issue. We should always remember that universities' responsibility when they admit students is to assess their potential rather than reward current levels of achievement, because there are lots of reasons why students have different current levels of achievement.

I have three points about contextualised admissions. First, there should be common agreement about what standard indicators should be used. Each university should not make up its own system and weigh different things in different ways, because that makes it extremely difficult for applicants to understand. Secondly, the use that the contextual information is put to should be much clearer, because there is a risk that it becomes a bit of a black box such that students know that certain factors have been taken into account but often do not know whether that has helped them, for example, by guaranteeing them a place, an interview or simply some consideration.

My final point is about an important issue that was raised in the Durham University report to which John Kemp referred, which is the issue of risk. It is probably unrealistic to expect all students, regardless of their current levels of attainment and previous secondary education experience, to continue to progress and get exactly the same degree outcomes as a student from a very privileged background with an excellent secondary education and excellent grades. We have to assess what is a reasonable risk for institutions to take in that regard. I sometimes feel that in Europe generally, certainly compared to the United States, where I spent some time, we are obsessed by wastage and regard any form of wastage as waste. The view in the United States is very much about the glass being half full rather than half empty. Although a student might not achieve their immediate goal, they can build on that experience for the future. We need to adopt that approach much more in the UK and in Scotland.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you. That brings us nicely to the end of our session. I thank each of you for your time and for your contributions, which have been illuminating. As ever, if there is something that you would like to have told us but forgot to do so, or if something develops, please keep in touch with the committee. We will keep the dialogue open.

I suspend proceedings to allow for a change of panel.

10:25

Meeting suspended.

10:31

On resuming—

The Deputy Convener: Good morning and welcome back to the meeting. I welcome our second panel for the day: Carol Baverstock, who is head of admissions at the University of Aberdeen, which is my alma mater; Ann Duncan, who is disability service manager at the University of Strathclyde; and Kirsty Knox, who is assistant head of the recruitment, admissions and participation service at the University of the West of Scotland. Thank you all for coming to see us this morning.

How does each of your institutions foster an atmosphere of inclusion with regard to admissions and to provision in lectures and tutorials for students who either are BSL users or have disabilities? How do you foster that inclusion in the wider student experience? We have heard a lot about universities getting it right with regard to support for lectures, but we have also heard about there being no provision when it comes to the

more social aspect of the university experience for students.

Carol Baverstock (University of Aberdeen): My expertise is in admissions and applications, and I am not directly involved in the registered student body and students' overall health and wellbeing. However, I know that the student experience is very much at the forefront of what we do at the University of Aberdeen, and that more and more work is going on to ensure that the student voice is heard and that student needs are met. The most recent university appointment that I am aware of is that of a mental health advisor, who has been in position since September. That is part of an overall strategy and action plan that is linked to the mental health and wellbeing of all our students, and that individual is looking to implement and evaluate the current strategies that are in place.

Our staff in student support and registry work with students daily. At the application stage, we look to get as much information as we can, but it is limited to what we receive through the UCAS process. Although UCAS is making amendments to the process and to the questions that it asks, we are—although not at its mercy—still having to follow the questions that UCAS asks.

UCAS is dealing with technology that needs to be updated. Although it has a landscape of change in place, the process is not necessarily moving at the pace that is required. UCAS has focused on the postgraduate journey ahead of the undergraduate journey, although it has started work on the latter. Of course, we can only get the data that UCAS asks applicants for, and that is what we have to work with in admissions.

That is only one particular aspect, but I will stop there for now.

Kirsty Knox (University of the West of Scotland): To carry on from what Carol Baverstock said, we are at the mercy of UCAS. I sit on the UCAS undergraduate advisory group, which had a meeting two weeks ago down in Cheltenham. It is true that UCAS has focused on postgraduates and that it has initiatives for undergraduates, but it is behind schedule. Therefore, any fixes or tweaks that we need to make to deal with BSL or alternative methods would not be quick fixes—there would be a long lead time. Next week, Carol Baverstock and I will go to the UCAS practitioners update and annual review, at which the new chief executive will present an update on where the organisation is in its development. We will find out more next week, but UCAS is behind schedule on the initiatives that it has had in place in the past 12 months. Therefore, putting any recommendation into practice will not have a quick turnaround, and that will impact on all UK institutions.

Ann Duncan (University of Strathclyde): I come at the issue from a different perspective from that of my colleagues, as I work in disability support. My colleagues in admissions reflect similar sentiments to those that Carol Baverstock and Kirsty Knox have shared in relation to the challenges with UCAS. We are potentially limited in making progress or getting quick fixes in that area.

At the University of Strathclyde, we have been working with our recruitment and international officers—they are in one section—to look at the information that is shared and disseminated to applicants at recruitment fairs, with the aim of enhancing that information and the profile of disability support provision in universities. I was recently involved in an awareness-raising day among school guidance teachers—they were mainly from the west of Scotland, although it was open to schools Scotland wide—and it was clear from the dialogues that I had that our counterparts in schools have limited knowledge of the support that is available to students with disabilities in universities and of how students go about accessing that support. Universities work with a very different model of support from the additional support needs model that is in place in schools and colleges. We are trying to work with schools to increase their awareness of that, to get students more prepared for university and the type of support that they can obtain there.

As with the approach that Carol Baverstock mentioned, when we get students in, one of our focuses is definitely on student mental health. The university recently launched a student mental health action plan, which has resulted in a significant investment in resources in that area. It involved the amalgamation of the disability service with wider support and wellbeing services, so we all now come under one umbrella, which allows us to better respond to the needs of the student group. With the previous panel, there was a discussion about the fact that the issue is wider than disability and is also about mental health.

A huge number of students are experiencing mental health issues at university, but they do not meet the criteria for being recognised as having a disability under the Equality Act 2010, and our institution is working to try to address better the needs of the wider student population.

The Deputy Convener: I want to press you a little bit more on the issue of the wider student experience and the practices deployed by your institutions that go beyond lecture theatres and tutorials to integrate people who might otherwise face exclusion in the social context of university.

Ann Duncan: Our university has a number of initiatives under way. The most recent one in which I have been involved is a partnership with the student unions on the student minds peer-support programme, which is targeted specifically at students experiencing mental health issues. With regard to our operational practices in the university's disability service, when we look at the support requirements of students with disabilities we are looking not simply at helping them to attend lectures but at the support that they need to access the student union, clubs and societies, the barriers to that access and how we can work with them to alleviate those barriers.

We very much take a holistic approach. The easiest issue to resolve is adjustments for students to enable them to attend lectures and participate and succeed in the academic environment, but that is only one aspect of university life. These students also live in halls, and we want to ensure that they are integrated and that their experience is comparable to that of any other first-year, undergraduate or graduate colleague, irrespective of what additional needs they have.

Mary Fee: In our evidence taking, we have heard that the application process is quite often the first barrier to accessing higher or university education, because it comes in only one format. One university said that alternative formats would be considered where appropriate and suggested that changing the application process should be an issue for UCAS, not individual universities themselves. How open are your institutions to allowing students to apply through different methods, and do you agree that that should be a matter for UCAS?

Kirsty Knox: Our university has two application methods. The predominant method is through UCAS, but we also work with agents and partners overseas, and European partners who might come to study for one trimester rather than a full year, and they can apply directly to the university. We have more flexibility in tweaking and amending our application form for alternative formats. Alternative format options are not available at the moment, but we are exploring them. In fact, a new vice-principal has come in over the past nine months, and he is looking at the customer journey and customer experience, so I am expecting some change to happen. There is far more structure under UCAS with regard to what we can and cannot do. There is more flexibility in our own application systems and it is an issue that we are looking at.

Mary Fee: That was helpful.

Carol Baverstock: Building on what Kirsty Knox has just said, I point out that as a UCAS member organisation we are essentially under contract to manage our undergraduate applications through that body. The applicant does not apply directly to each institution; their

application is submitted to UCAS, and the information is passed on.

Obviously, though, the world is changing, and we are looking at different ways of delivering education. It is not just about the on-campus experience; we have campuses overseas, distance learning arrangements and online learning. Our undergraduate population applies through UCAS, but our postgraduate population generally applies online, which gives us a lot more flexibility in the questions that we can ask those applicants.

It is interesting that we developed a significant online profile, mainly at the postgraduate level, for September 2017 entry, and there has been extensive discussion in the University of Aberdeen about that journey for the applicant and the need to ask the level of questioning that is asked through the traditional undergraduate and postgraduate processes. It is about trying to recognise that the online learner has different needs and requirements and that the steps that they have to go through in order to become a registered student do not have to be exactly the same as those for undergraduates through UCAS, and about trying to streamline the procedure and make it much easier and less questioning. An online learner will probably never be on campus.

10:45

Ann Duncan: My response is very similar to Kirsty Knox's response. There are restrictions in UCAS thought. There is more flexibility in how the localised application forms for direct applicants to the institution are received, and there would not be an issue with their being considered in an alternative format.

Mary Fee: Obviously, given the comments that Kirsty Knox made about the length of time that it takes UCAS to change, any change will not happen in the immediate future.

Kirsty Knox: Yes. In the past year, a new chief executive has come into UCAS. She came in in July, and we will meet her for the first time on Tuesday. Its marketing director, its policy and statistics person and Giles Ursell, who worked on the content of the online application form, have left. A lot of staff have exited UCAS in the past six months. One of the directors was at the meeting that I was at, and they said, "Don't worry; it's not a sinking ship. All is still well. Everything is moving forward."

There is an element of frustration. I attended that meeting with University of Edinburgh representation. We have been given a wish list from all Scottish universities of what they would like UCAS to focus on and prioritise, and we are still unclear about what it has focused on and

prioritised. I hope that, on Tuesday, we will get more of a sense of the direction in which it is going and get a clear understanding of the timescale. I understood that we would have that in play by next year, but now I am really not sure about that. It might be 2019. A slippage has happened.

Carol Baverstock: UCAS has, of course, been criticised by universities when it has tried to bring about change without due notice. With a technology-based change, each university and how it receives the data from UCAS will be managed differently with different systems. Therefore, there is justification for a long lead-in time.

The other aspect, which is perhaps a delicate one, is Scotland's voice. There are about 16 institutions in Scotland and nearly 400 institutions are members of UCAS. Through the admissions groups that the Scottish universities are part of, we are very vocal in our views and wishes, and we do not like to be forgotten, but we have a small voice when UCAS is listening to the rest of its customer base. That includes applicants in schools as well as all the institutions south of the border.

The Deputy Convener: I want to interrogate that revelation that there has been a massive change in the senior management at UCAS. It strikes me that UCAS is part of the jigsaw of improving and widening access. Is that change a problem? Is the organisation in distress? Will that be a barrier to our efforts?

Kirsty Knox: At the meeting that I was at, we were comforted by the fact that Clare Marchant wants to halt where we are right now and does not want to rush. She wants to get a sense of where we are and where UCAS is as an organisation and identify the key things that it now wants to work on. It might be behind schedule, but she wants to halt where it is and involve all the petitioners and all the higher education providers. Rather than ignoring our voice, she wants to work in partnership, which is a bit of a change.

Carol Baverstock: UCAS has brought about a lot of change already. It has focused on its different customer groups and to some extent it has improved the way in which information is made available to potential applicants. It has improved the systems that allow universities to promote degrees and information relating to them. Behind the scenes there is a huge investment going on in terms of its technology and development. I think that it has just hit a little stall. It is a pause, but UCAS is looking to progress with renewed vigour. It has to get a mandate from its members, which will be through next week's annual update and our annual conference in March.

Gail Ross: Thank you for coming along. Mary Fee touched on the application process. When the committee took evidence on that, a certain number of people said that there needed to be greater transparency on how applications are processed—Carol Baverstock touched on the UCAS side of that just now. That included how contextual applications operate. Will you tell us a bit about those?

Carol Baverstock: Through university outcome agreements and our discussions with the funding council, applications are constantly evolving in terms of contextual information. There are additional fields in the application that we are analysing. Universities will present their minimum entry requirement, which is an indication of what an applicant must have in order to be considered, but there are other factors. Universities are now doing more and more to explain what those other factors are and how they are measured, assessed and used in the process.

The journey is not complete by any means. There will be more and more that can be said to give our audience more information. We are looking to get a sense of the experiences that an applicant has had through their schooling and more widely. It is difficult, but the information that is presented in the application is what we have to go on. Telling the story can be problematic, because some information can be very sensitive and applicants are putting that into a great big UCAS system through a personal statement or a reference.

Universities do a lot to engage with schools through outreach work. We work with schools directly through a lot of environments, such as the aim 4 uni scheme at Aberdeen and the reach project, to give applicants the confidence to talk to us or communicate with us off the record, so that we can marry their information with their application. We are trying to do more and more to get that message across in our outreach work and the extensive work that we are doing with schools, so that we get all that information. We are encouraging applicants to declare and answer questions as best they can and as honestly as they can in the UCAS application, so that we can enter into that dialogue.

Admissions is now much more about a continued dialogue. It is not just a case of taking an application and making a yes or no decision. There is greater engagement with applicants, schools and advisers than there once was. It was never straightforward and it is even less straightforward now.

Ann Duncan: We do a lot of work with academic selectors when the applications come in. They consider in detail students' personal statements. We know that there are ever-increasing pressures on applicants to illustrate a really broad range of external experiences. Indeed, students who have work or voluntary experiences are looked on favourably. However, for applicants with disabilities—particularly those with significant disabilities—such experiences may not be achievable. All that they can do is focus on their academic work, whether that is to get their two As and three Bs or their five As, or whatever.

We have been working with academic selectors to take into consideration that an applicant's suitability is not only about what is in their personal statement and that, sometimes, it is okay just to look at the entry requirements. The contextualised approach—considering things in context—is great, but there are issues. The problem goes beyond applications; it continues when the applicants are accepted and follows them into employment. There is so much pressure on students to do more than just obtain a degree, which in itself is hugely challenging for the bulk of them, irrespective of whether they have additional support needs or disabilities. We need to make selectors aware of that and to get that awareness to follow the students through into employment—that is another challenge.

Kirsty Knox: UWS is quite a different organisation, with a broad-based student population. We have a widening access agenda—more than 50 per cent of our students come from an SIMD40 data zone. We have an outreach and student recruitment team who work closely together.

From this morning's discussions, I am sensing that our disability team could be doing slightly more and enhancing the information that we give out. However, we have a strong focus on outreach work across the university and we work closely with our secondary schools and further education colleges.

Gail Ross: Do you have any evidence that your institution is taking forward contextualised applications as part of the national BSL plan?

Ann Duncan: In a couple weeks, the BSL plan will be discussed by our equality and diversity strategy committee. We are at the early stages of implementation, and the recommendations from the committee's report will be considered in detail when we implement the BSL plan.

Gail Ross: What challenges do you see arising from the implementation of the plan? Perhaps that is an easier or more straightforward question to answer.

Carol Baverstock: I was given information by our disability team. When I was previously before the committee, the particular challenge regarding BSL interpreters in the north-east was mentioned. I think that the phrase "dearth of interpreters" was

used to describe the situation. That presents a real challenge for students who would require those services were they to come to study in and around Aberdeen, not just at the University of Aberdeen, but at Robert Gordon University and the college. That is of major concern. Our disability and student support team will be taking that on board. The team has been attending meetings recently and is working with our equalities officer within our human resources section. My notes mention Alison Hendry, who will be working with the further education college and the higher education sector in the north-east to take forward that work.

Kirsty Knox: We have a member of staff who has been training herself in BSL. She has a video under the student support section on our website. She has been engaging with each of our six schools, making sure that they have a general welcome. We have also been looking at working with a rich-media company on video content about our programme information, why people should come to UWS to study, a virtual tour and so on. We have a BSL slant for that, too. We have lots of plans in development. At the moment, we have one BSL video online.

11:00

Ann Duncan: From a student support perspective, one of the challenges for us will be getting the sector to recognise the BSL plan as something that extends beyond the mere provision of support for BSL users in higher education. The BSL act has been passed but, from speaking to my counterparts at other institutions, I know that providing support for BSL users is being perceived as a student support issue, yet the fundamentals of the act are to get BSL recognised as a language and having a culture in its own right.

We will have the same practical challenges as everyone else with regard to resources and the availability of sign language interpreters, but there will also be challenges with getting the BSL plan recognised as something that is much broader.

The Deputy Convener: I would like to pick up on Ann Duncan's last point. I was also struck when you said earlier that your institution is at the stage of discussing the implementation of the BSL plan. There is clearly a tremendous amount of good will around BSL and an understanding that we should be doing more, but it is important to recognise that it is an official minority language. It is not just on the equalities agenda; it is a culture in and of itself.

I am also reflecting on Kirsty Knox's remarks about the fact that one member of staff at her institution is teaching herself BSL. Do institutions need to do more to proactively recruit translators or to train translators in-house to respond to the challenge of the BSL plan?

You are all silently nodding, so that must have been an easy question. I have a harder question: how and who?

Kirsty Knox: The member of staff I mentioned is very keen and wants to do more, but there are conflicting views in the organisation about priority, role and remit. Unless we have a dedicated person whose role that is, the confusion and struggle will carry on. I hope that it is not just a UWS thing, but that is where we feel that there is a conflict.

The Deputy Convener: Do you, or could you, build it into your continuous professional development for, for example, lecturing or teaching staff?

Kirsty Knox: I am not aware that we do, but we could do that.

Carol Baverstock: That would be a valid thing to do.

David Torrance: I want to return to the impact that Brexit will have on the university sector, applications and the possible loss of some of the European equality laws. Further, what will be the effect on the university sector of the loss of European funding and its trickle-down effect?

Carol Baverstock: When we go to our UCAS meeting next week, we will get some statistical information with regard to applications for the 2017 cycle. We had an informal meeting of UCAS practitioners on Monday and received some advance information that suggests that acceptances to the Scottish universities for 2017 entry have increased, which is contrary to what has happened south of the border, and that the increased acceptances to Scottish universities have been predominantly from Scotland-domiciled students.

However, Scotland operates in a different environment from south of the border, where there is no cap and the universities are free to take as many students as they want. That is not the situation in Scotland, where there is a control on the overall population of the institutions that has to be factored in. There is an expectation that European Union applications will decline, and that has already started to happen. We have fewer EU applications coming into UCAS at undergraduate level.

In terms of the overall staffing and funding, all universities in Scotland will have concerns about the links that they have with other European universities, academic staff and funding that is available through the European Union structure. I suspect that all universities in Scotland are examining what the impact will be in that regard.

Kirsty Knox: We have already noticed a few European lecturers—not a significant number; perhaps only two or three—leaving UWS and going back to their home country.

David Torrance: Is there a suggestion that people could be made redundant because of a loss of European funding?

Carol Baverstock: I would not say that that is necessarily the case, and I am not party to that sort of information. Universities will be concerned that they will not have full inclusion in terms of the developments around research activities if we are not part of the European Union.

The Deputy Convener: We are coming up to the end of our time, but we always have time for Annie Wells, who has a question on another topic.

Annie Wells: I was encouraged to hear you speak about making mental health more of a priority in universities. We know that people who disclose mental health issues have some of the lowest outcomes. What are you doing to encourage people to disclose that they have a mental health issue? Are you looking at staff training, too, so that cover is in place all the time and not just at the admissions or application stage?

Ann Duncan: As I said earlier, we have just launched a student mental health action plan. That is very much focused on students' mental health and overall mental wellbeing. We recognise that it is fundamentally important that we flip things on their head. We are encouraged by the fact that the number of students who are declaring mental health issues is increasing. However, we know that there is significant underreporting and that, as I said earlier, many students do not equate having a mental health issue with having a disability. Basically, we are trying to implement a new strategy that focuses very much on prevention and awareness raising. We are working closely with the student union to implement a number of initiatives to try to work with the general student population. We know that although the demand for the support services—not just disability counselling but health services and so on—is increasing, we are seeing only a small proportion of the students who have mental health issues.

We are also working with staff across the academic departments. We have started a mental health first aid training programme that will be rolled out across the whole university. That work is in its early stages, but we already have disability contacts in every department and we are considering extending their role to make them into disability and wellbeing advisers. We are doing that in recognition of the fact that the bulk of students are not coming near student support and we need to work with academic colleagues and

the student population. We know that students are more likely to tell their friends about challenges that they are experiencing than to speak to either an academic member of staff or a member of the support services, and we need to work with the student cohort and upskill them to enable them to better support each other.

Annie Wells: I am encouraged to hear that mental health is being taken seriously in the disability framework of universities.

The Deputy Convener: The committee is interested in the review of student support that is expected, but we are not sighted on when that is likely to be forthcoming. Can you shed any light on that for us?

Kirsty Knox: In terms of the SFC outcome agreements?

The Deputy Convener: Yes.

Kirsty Knox: The SFC was at UWS yesterday. I was not party to the meeting but, through a colleague, I know that although we have not been given outcome agreements, we have been given a ministerial letter of guidance, which contains sections on widening access, gender balance, science, technology, engineering and mathematics and so on. That is part of the intensification that Dr Kemp talked about earlier.

We have not been given our outcome agreement yet, but we are aware that it gives more content in relation to what has been discussed in the committee.

The Deputy Convener: That brings us to the end of our questioning. Thank you for your time this morning—your contributions have been helpful to our considerations. There were, of course, questions that you did not feel comfortable answering on behalf of your institutions—I am sorry if you felt put on the spot at any point. The institutions are more than welcome to write to us if they want to provide clarification. Similarly, if you feel that there was something that you would have liked to say but did not have the opportunity to do so, you can get in touch with us and we can continue our discussion as an open dialogue.

11:11

Meeting continued in private until 11:25.