OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 21 February 2018

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 21 February 2018

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
6th Meeting 2018, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)
*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Professor Sir Peter Scott (Commissioner for Fair Access)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 21 February 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the sixth meeting in 2018 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone present to switch their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take items 3 and 4 in private. Is everyone content that we take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Commissioner for Fair Access

10:01

The Convener: The next item of business is an evidence-taking session with the commissioner for fair access. The committee is keeping a watching brief on the work on widening access following the Government's endorsement of the work by the commission on fair access. Last year, the committee heard from the commissioner when he was new to his post. This evidence session is to get an update from the commissioner on his work over the past year as well as on his planned work. It will be useful context for the evidence-taking session with the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, who will give evidence to the committee, primarily on widening access, on 7 March.

I welcome to the committee Professor Sir Peter Scott, the commissioner for fair access and, in a supporting capacity, Lynn MacMillan, who is the strategic lead on access to higher education at the Scottish Government. I understand that Professor Scott will make a short opening statement.

Professor Sir Peter Scott (Commissioner for Fair Access): Thank you very much for inviting me to meet the committee today. I will keep my opening statement very brief, because I have submitted a written statement and I will simply emphasise one or two key issues within it. I am sure that some of the issues that I raise will cover areas on which you have questions.

First, I emphasise how successful Scotland has been in higher education. It has the highest participation rate in the United Kingdom—56 per cent as opposed to 49 per cent in England. Generally, there is little to apologise for in relation to Scotland's commitment to its colleges and universities. Of course, there is always more to be done. I have tried to summarise in my written statement the comments that I have made in my annual report, so I will not go over those in great detail.

I see that concern has been expressed in the Scottish Parliament information centre paper that I have potentially made rather too many recommendations. I am happy to deal with that issue if I am asked questions about it.

My overall assessment is that progress has been steady. Across the higher education sector as a whole, progress has been impressive. Some institutions have been much more committed to achieving fair access, largely for objective reasons rather than for reasons of choice. It is important that all institutions make a substantial commitment to the fair access agenda. Having said that, I consider it wrong to focus so strongly on the role

of the ancient universities that the important contribution that is made by the colleges is somehow downgraded.

Most of the matters that I cover in my annual report are issues that were raised with me in discussions with people in institutions and other agencies, and they cover a fairly familiar list: admissions and progression, particularly contextual admissions and adjusted offers being made to students from more deprived backgrounds, and articulation—particularly the record of college students with higher nationals not being given sufficient academic credit if they transfer to degree programmes. I have potentially been a little bit more critical of that area.

In addition to my annual report, I have published four discussion documents, which are available on the website and to which I have provided references. The most recent of those, which was published just last month, is on retention, outcomes and destinations. It brings new data to the debate—at least, it presents data in a more accessible way.

The issue of my independence came up the last time that I appeared before the committee, and I am sure that it will come up this time. I have provided a brief summary of how I feel about that in my submission, but I would be happy to be questioned on the issue. The second concern that was expressed when I appeared before the committee a year ago was on the question of a budget and other forms of support. I will be happy to answer questions on those matters, too.

I thank everyone who has supported me in my work as the commissioner for fair access. As I said in my submission, it has been a privilege to have been given an opportunity to make a contribution to a cause that I strongly believe in and have always been strongly committed to.

I will stop there, listen to your questions and try to answer them.

The Convener: The deputy convener, Johann Lamont, has some questions.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you for coming along and for providing a very interesting submission. Your statement was interesting, too.

I want to ask you about the series of recommendations that you make. The original report on widening access made a number of recommendations, and you have produced a further 20-odd recommendations, which make interesting reading. I might highlight a couple of them shortly.

What is the standing of the recommendations? Where are they now? Who has responsibility for implementing them? How will you measure progress on their implementation?

Professor Scott: I made 23 recommendations, and I know that Universities Scotland said in its submission that I had made rather too many recommendations in addition to those that were made by the commission on fair access. Universities Scotland has undertaken work in this area and has produced its own recommendations, so it perhaps feels weighed down under the load of recommendations.

I had a meeting with Universities Scotland two weeks ago, at which I tried to explain what I saw as the status of many of my recommendations. Most of them are in areas that are familiar and that are covered by other recommendations, so they are really variations on recommendations that have already been made. In many cases, they urge that rather faster progress be made.

Other recommendations are more in the nature of suggested topics for discussion or issues that I feel should be debated more widely in the sector. For example, I make a potentially controversial recommendation about the need to look more carefully at measures of success and suggest that, because our current measures of success are very much focused on the experience of traditional students, they might not always be sufficiently sensitive or flexible when it comes to students from different backgrounds. That is an example of a recommendation that suggests an issue for debate; it is not a recommendation that I would expect anyone to be able to implement in the short or even the medium term.

Most of my recommendations either cover familiar territory and try to advance recommendations that have already been made by the commission on fair access or by Universities Scotland or they put forward matters on which I would like there to be wider debate in the sector. Of course, one or two recommendations that I make are potentially more challenging. One of them is potentially more challenging for the Government—I suggest that it should review the total number of funded places that are available. I hope that, at some point, the Government might provide a response to that recommendation.

Johann Lamont: I wonder whether we could expect more than to hope that, sometime, we might get a response. It would be helpful if there was an expectation on the Government to respond. I noticed that particular recommendation in the context of the debate that we are having across the United Kingdom about the funding of students and the idea of a cap—and the implications of a cap—on Scottish-domiciled students. I have been told that it is more difficult for a Scottish-domiciled student to get into

university now than it has been at any time in the past 10 years. I do not know whether that is true, but it would be useful to find out. We would encourage you to expect the Government to respond to that particular recommendation.

I also ask you to reflect on your last recommendation, which is interesting. It makes the point that we should look at widening access not just in relation to people aged 17 but in relation to people who were denied the opportunity when they were 17 but want to study when they are 25 or 30. How should that recommendation be taken forward?

Professor Scott: On the question of a cap, there has been quite an important debate about the issue of displacement and whether, in a capped system, when more students from disadvantaged backgrounds are recruited, other students may potentially be squeezed out by that. The evidence so far about whether that is happening on any significant scale is relatively unclear; nevertheless, there is a strong perception that it is happening. Therefore, it is an important issue.

Clearly, it would help if there was slightly more flexibility in the funded places that are available, which would address some of the fears about displacement. I say in my recommendations that there are opportunities to increase the number of funded places without necessarily increasing the budget for higher education. Of course, as someone who comes from higher education, I would be in favour of increasing the budget as well.

Sadly, one of the effects of Brexit—if it happens—will be that European Union students, except those from the rest of the UK, will no longer be within the cap number. That is currently a total of almost 4,000 students, which is a significant number. If you compare that with the number of students who will be required to meet the targets in 2021 or even in 2026, the numbers will be significantly less than the number of other EU students.

There are also opportunities to make savings in terms of what I call smarter articulation—giving higher national students more credit if they transfer to degree programmes. There are other reasons why that is desirable, but one of the effects would be to release more funded places. I hope that the Government, in acting on my recommendation, will look carefully at how such opportunities might be seized upon and whether there is an opportunity to increase the total number of funded places without a significant increase in the higher education budget, which would address fears of displacement. That would also give institutions the headroom to recruit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is an important recommendation, although I accept that it is a difficult one for the Government. There will always be competing pressures on public spending.

On your second point, about older students and students with other forms of disadvantage, I deliberately included a recommendation on them in my report because there is a widespread perception—although I think it is a mistaken one—that the targets are focused only on young adults. In fact, if we read the commission's report and look at how the Government has expressed the targets, that appears not to be the case. They talk about students of all ages, although those students are initial entrants to higher education. I thought that it was important to emphasise that the needs of adult returners should be given equal weight.

Johann Lamont: What is your expectation regarding the timetable for a response to the recommendations? We do not want to come back in a year—God willing—and find that we are still hoping for a response.

My final question is about the coming year. I am interested in what you say about articulation, because I know from the colleges that I have spoken to that there is an issue about how some of the college courses are valued. Will you look at articulation from the work that is done in secondary 6? That is substantial now in comparison with what happened when I was teaching. A lot of young people do huge amounts of work in sixth year that is replicated in the first year at university. Is there a place for you to do that kind of work? Do you see that as part of your role in freeing up the system a bit and opening up opportunities for students?

10:15

Professor Scott: On your first point, about when the Government will respond, there will be a meeting of the fair access delivery group next week. The group is chaired by the minister and I attend it. I have been told that, after that meeting, there will be some kind of response by the Government. I have no idea how much detail the Government will go into or whether it will respond to all the recommendations I have made, but I am confident that there will be a fairly prompt response from the Government.

Johann Lamont: Will that response be made public?

Professor Scott: I understand that it will be. I think that it will be in the form of a ministerial statement, so it will be made public.

Your second point, on articulation, touches on an important issue on which I push a bit harder

than Universities Scotland might care to. I think it is important that there should be precise targets for the articulation of students who are doing higher nationals and who transfer to degree programmes. The default starting position should be that they are given full credit. The higher national is, after all a full two-year higher education qualification, so they should, logically, enter year 3 of a degree programme, although I know that there will be reasons why that is not always appropriate, particularly if they are changing their subject significantly.

I also include under the heading of articulation the interface between the final year in secondary school—S6—and the first undergraduate year, because there is probably a significant overlap in some areas. Although I defend strongly the principle of four-year undergraduate degrees—which is, after all, the international global standard; it is England that is out of step with it—I think that better use could often be made of the first year of undergraduate education. Perhaps there should even be some co-teaching back into S6—I do not know, but it should be considered. The Government has introduced the learner journey initiative, which is looking at that issue among others. That, too, will help to produce a better transition.

I am conscious that, in some countries, particularly the United States, a lot of attention is focused on the first-year experience in university. Here in Scotland, and more generally in the UK, there is not the same emphasis on that.

The Convener: I believe that other members are going to ask you about that first-year experience.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Professor Scott, can you turn your attention to the relevant data? When you came to the committee last year, you mentioned that there are issues about whether the right data is available. When we had an evidence session with Petra Wend, Susan Stewart and Sally Mapstone, that was quite a big issue. The Universities Scotland briefing paper for this meeting says that it is concerned that we do not have the most relevant and effective data available, which makes policy decisions quite difficult. Do you feel that progress has been made in identifying that data, or does a lot more need to be done to provide it?

Professor Scott: There is always a need to do more work, but a technical group is looking at improving the data and it will meet next week. Professor Wend, in particular, referred to the idea of the unique learner number, which would help. There are many different measures of disadvantage, and the more accurate a fix we can get on it, the better.

Having said that, there is a lively debate about whether the current dominant measure—the Scottish index of multiple deprivation—is the best marker of deprivation. It is not the only measure but you will see that, in my report, on the whole, I defend it. First, although it is an area-based metric, it is quite a fine-grained one, certainly compared with the participation of local areas measure—POLAR—the UK-wide system that covers larger populations.

Secondly, I think that the intention is to focus on deeply entrenched, community-based forms of deprivation that are reproduced generation by generation. If that is the primary focus, the SIMD is probably quite a good measure. However, other measures should be used as well. I answered an earlier question about adult students. I have always felt strongly that adult returners and adult learners are, to some extent, disadvantaged by our current higher education system, so I think that they should be considered.

However, we should be wary of having a proliferation of markers of disadvantage. I was told by both the University of St Andrews and the University of Edinburgh that up to half of their new Scottish entrants have at least one marker of disadvantage. That is rather too many, and it rather diffuses the whole thing. We want to keep the focus relatively tightly on deprivation.

Liz Smith: I understand that point. However, if the real focus has to be on schools, to make things better for colleges and universities, there is a strong argument that, in fact, it is schools that matter most in this regard. The SIMD has its failings in respect of picking up the students in schools who are most likely to be in need of help, because it is a neighbourhood measure. There are children within the SIMD 20 who will do a lot better and there are children who are not in it who will have difficulty.

The point that some of your colleagues are making is that we are not clear about the relevance of some of the data sets. Universities Scotland makes that point strongly in its submission. Do you have any ideas on what we can do to improve our knowledge of who is most in need of help and, therefore, where policy should be directed, bearing in mind that it is very much about schools policy?

Professor Scott: With a lot of the data that we have, there is often a trade-off between its relevance and its accuracy, although there are some unambiguous indicators such as eligibility for free school meals and so on, which are widely used by all institutions. Coming from a school that has a poor record of sending people on to higher education might be another indicator although, again, it is a group indicator rather than an individually focused one.

Some excellent research that the Scottish funding council commissioned on contextual admissions contains a very good description of the issue of trying to get the right balance between the most reliable forms of data and the most relevant forms of data.

There continues to be, and there must continue to be, an important debate on the matter. We need to focus as much as possible on improving our data. Having said that—I hope that this comment will not be misinterpreted—a lot of evidence and data are available, and we sort of know what the problems are. The issue is whether we have the will and the resources to address them.

Liz Smith: With respect, I do not think that that is quite the argument that Universities Scotland is making. It is arguing that it does not have some of the data that it believes it needs to pass on to its institutions. In that context, and given your huge experience in the sector and your knowledge of the international aspects of higher education, is there data that others use that might be helpful for us to have in Scotland in order to progress the policy?

Professor Scott: The absence of a unique learner number is an issue that can and should be remedied. One of the other forms of data that Universities Scotland is particularly concerned about is data on individual attainment levels, although I realise that that data is not necessarily always available in as complete a form as it would like.

Having said that, the absence of data can occasionally be used as a kind of blanket excuse. For example, in discussing the setting of minimum entry standards, Universities Scotland says that it would be helpful to have more data on individual attainment levels. I do not completely accept that point, because setting a minimum entry standard is an academic issue about the knowledge and skills that a student will need. I agree that the next stage is about trying to map whether an individual applicant has the necessary knowledge and skills, but setting a minimum entry standard does not necessarily require detailed knowledge of individual attainment levels by applicant.

Liz Smith: I think that Universities Scotland feels that there is more relevant information on thresholds than on minimum entry requirements, which is a different point. Do you agree that, if we are to resolve matters, we need to have good data for both?

Professor Scott: One can never have enough data—that is clear.

The Convener: I am not sure that I completely agree with that.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I have to confess that I am a bit confused by this line of questioning. A university ultimately chooses student by student who to accept, but if its criterion is the SIMD 20 analysis, the two do not compute.

Professor Scott: In making offers, universities have always taken other factors into account apart from the formal attainment level of an individual applicant, such as the applicant's school or other data or information about them. An example is the personal statements of UCAS applicants, to which universities attach some weight. Recent research on a UK basis by the Sutton Trust showed that personal statements work against access, if anything, because the people who are best able to write a convincing personal statement are probably the applicants who already have a good deal of support.

Universities have always had to balance the formal criteria—the attainment level of an individual pupil—against the wider surrounding factors. The task that universities are being asked to undertake is not new—it is just that it involves hinterland information other than what they have traditionally taken.

Tavish Scott: In your research over the past year or so in Scotland, have you found that universities are just taking different approaches from one another in how they make an individual assessment of a student's ability to join the particular faculty?

Professor Scott: All universities in Scotland take contextual data into account when making individual offers. They tend to have their own customised systems.

Tavish Scott: Is comparing like with like quite difficult?

Professor Scott: It is difficult, although if we look in detail, we see that many of the indicators that they use are the same, as you would expect. One recommendation that Universities Scotland has come up with, which I strongly support, is that there should be a consistent agreed core of indicators that all universities would take into account. As I said a year ago, the current system can be a bit opaque and obscure to someone who is applying for a place and to the people who are advising them. The greater the transparency we have, the better.

Tavish Scott: Would you set out for the committee your point about having unique learner numbers for people from the age of five? What are the principal advantages of that approach for how we ultimately make judgments at application time?

Professor Scott: With a unique learner number, we can look at an applicant's individual attainment levels, specific individual attributes and

so on. That gets over the SIMD neighbourhood problem, by which we group people in a neighbourhood rather than as individuals.

Tavish Scott: Would that system be better in the longer term?

Professor Scott: It would be useful alongside the SIMD. The primary focus on community-based deprivation that is reproduced across generations is still an important principle.

Tavish Scott: Thank you.

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): I was going to ask about something similar to what Tavish Scott asked about, so you have covered that point, but there is something that I want to pin down. The Government's ambition is that, by 2030, students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent 20 per cent of entrants to higher education. The use of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation is controversial because it does not capture rural deprivation and poverty. In light of what you have just said, is it urgent to review how we capture rural deprivation, in your work and wider work, to ensure that we are identifying and taking into account the needs of rural communities.

10:30

Professor Scott: The original target was set on the basis of communities, and said that people from the most deprived communities should have the same opportunity to enter higher education as people from the most advantaged communities. It would require the Government to change its mind about how it defines that target. As I have said in my report and here, I support the idea of a focus on communities to a significant degree.

Nevertheless, it is important that there should be as much information as possible when individual universities make individual offers to students. That does not necessarily contradict a wider obligation to meet a target denominated in the SIMD. Perhaps this is too hopeful, but my hope is that, if we get it right on the first—making well-judged, finely nuanced decisions about individual applicants, with regard to disadvantage—we will also get it right on the second and meet targets for recruiting more students from more deprived backgrounds.

Richard Lochhead: It is quite a complex area. My fundamental point is that the term "communities" has to be identified in some shape or form. The Scottish index of multiple deprivation is generally used to identify communities in deprivation, albeit that you are looking at different ways to measure it. I am trying to work out whether universities and higher education institutions will automatically focus their efforts on certain parts of Scotland because it is easy to do that because of the index that they use. Does that make sense?

If universities are looking at a numbers game—they have to achieve certain percentages by a certain date—they will focus on certain communities in Scotland that are thrown up by the indexes that are currently used across Government. However, if those indexes do not take into account rural poverty, I presume that the focus will be on certain parts of the country and not on all the country.

Professor Scott: That is obviously a strong argument. Universities sometimes complain that the current system obliges them to focus on recruiting students with a particular marker, even though a student with the same apparent degree of disadvantage who lives two streets away somehow is not so attractive to them because they do not help them to meet the target. I suppose that that might happen at the margin.

There is also the argument that, because there are not enough applicants from SIMD 20 areas in the first place, the most urgent priority is to try to expand the number of well-qualified applicants from those areas. I agree with that argument and have covered it quite a lot in my report. The access framework development group is doing a lot of work to increase the number of people from those areas who wish to apply to university; it is currently working to produce a toolkit and to develop community practice.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Universities Scotland said in its submission that widening access and retention should go hand in hand. The committee heard interesting feedback from universities on our visit to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. I was struck by Glasgow Caledonian University, which provides accommodation throughout the year for care-experienced young people—as that is a huge challenge—under its corporate parenting responsibilities. I would be interested to hear your reflection on the priority that is given to retention.

Professor Scott: Access and retention do go hand in hand—and not just retention, but success. My discussion document, which was published three or four weeks ago, shows that there is attrition at every stage. People from SIMD areas who are admitted are still more likely not to transfer to the second year. They are rather more likely to receive an ordinary degree than an honours degree, and they are rather less likely to get a good degree—a first-class honours degree or a 2:1. Rather alarmingly, even if they get a good degree, they are less likely to get a graduate job. There is a very complex picture of discrimination and disadvantage in play here, and all that needs to be taken into account when it comes to access.

It is not enough just to get people admitted and to leave it there.

In my report, I open up the issue of whether we need to look more closely at how we define success. For example, all universities will have quite strict academic regulations that determine whether someone is eligible to move from year 1 to year 2 and into subsequent years. The Scottish funding council frequently has criteria to define the circumstances in which students continue to be eligible for funding. All that is necessary, but those criteria and regulations have been established against a background of a very unfair distribution of students, which is made up of students who are well qualified and well prepared and who, on the whole, come from advantaged social backgrounds. The system mirrors their experience and their progression, so we might need to develop a bit more flexibility.

This is very tricky territory, because the moment you start talking about it, people think that you are conniving at dumbing down, which is the last thing that I would want to do. I think that I made this point a year ago: in the UK generally, progression rates are incredibly high compared with those in the United States. In general, Americans are much more relaxed about success; they use the phrase "step out" rather than "drop out". It would be good to move to such an outlook and to have more flexible systems.

There are many issues that need to be addressed. We need to do anything that we can to free up rules about progression and so on so that we give people the maximum opportunity to progress. We need to make sure that, when it comes to degree classifications, we have good criteria that are in no way biased. It might be slightly mischievous to say so, but universities generally in the UK and here in Scotland have substantially increased the proportion of good degrees—2:1s and firsts—that they award. Why has that happened? We can all speculate about why that might have happened; it might have something to do with competition, league tables and so on. That shows that universities can be flexible in certain contexts. Maybe they need to be flexible in bearing in mind fair access considerations.

Ruth Maguire: It certainly feels as though that is a priority, because none of us would want to set people up to fail. The disadvantages that young people or adult returners have experienced do not just go away when they get a university place; they are still there.

Professor Scott: I absolutely agree. There is a lot of research evidence that shows that, on the whole, people who go to university and then drop out are left with a sense of failure and are often more disadvantaged as a result of that than they would have been if they had not gone to university in the first place.

That raises the issue of whether we have a flexible enough system. One of the recommendations that I make as a point for discussion rather than as a recommendation that needs to be implemented is that we should move towards a more holistic view of a more integrated tertiary system that would allow people who had dropped out at one stage to come back at another stage in a different area. We need a system that is generally much more flexible. I think that that is acknowledged; it is simply that it is difficult to achieve.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. I want to pick up on a couple of issues. We have already discussed the issue of contextualised admissions. I am also a member of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee, to which you recently gave evidence. On that occasion, we discussed contextualised admissions, which are the process whereby grades are weighted against certain social factors to help to level the playing field for students. You made three specific points on the subject. Your first point was that there should be common agreement on the indicators that are used. You have touched on that briefly, but I would be grateful if you could provide a bit more detail on what progress has been made in that area.

The second thing that you picked up on is the way in which information is used and the clarity about that. How aware are students of the weight that is put on different factors that they highlight?

The third area that you highlighted was a report from Durham University, which talked about risk. I particularly like the phrase that you just used—"step out" rather than "drop out". The issue is how success is measured.

I would be grateful if you could reflect on those matters and tell me what progress is being made on them.

Professor Scott: The identification of core indicators that everyone would use was a recommendation that the Universities Scotland working group chaired by Sally Mapstone made. Universities Scotland is carrying forward that work and I am content that it should do that.

There is general agreement that we need to focus on a certain number of core indicators that all universities would use. That said, universities reserve the right to have their own subsidiary indicators as well. Provided that it does not detract from the focus on the primary indicators, that is fine, because particular universities in particular regions might have particular needs. For instance, addressing more rural communities could be a

relevant indicator in one university but not in a university in Glasgow.

In general, I am reasonably satisfied that progress will be made on that matter. However, I am less clear about how universities intend to carry forward the second issue, to be frank. It is extremely important that, if people have a marker or indicator of some kind, they have a good understanding of what weight will be attached to that. Does it guarantee them an interview, a place or simply some rather nebulous extra consideration? That should be made as clear as possible.

I accept that there are limits to that because, after all, we are talking about individual decisions that universities are making about individual candidates. I mentioned personal statements. Universities always take into account individual information and it can be a bit difficult to generalise that and say exactly what weight will be attached to it. However, there should be a better understanding of the relative weight that is attached to such considerations.

On the final issue, we should occasionally be prepared to take a few more risks. If we admitted students to universities only when we were absolutely sure that they would definitely succeed, get good degrees and get graduate jobs, we would admit far fewer than we do. Opportunity requires us to accept some element of risk.

Mary Fee: We talked about how students who leave university for whatever reason sometimes feel that they have failed. Do universities have a view that the students who drop out are also failing?

Professor Scott: There probably is a default position throughout the UK that, if someone drops out, they have failed. That, again, contrasts with the United States, where the attitude would be that the person has achieved up to that point, can put that in the bank and can bring it back at some other point. In formal terms, we have such systems in the UK. It is often possible for people to transfer their credit and bring it back at a later stage. However, in practice, it happens a lot less than it should do. The issue is more about an approach—a mentality— than it is about the detail of the systems.

Mary Fee: Before I move on to the second point about which I wanted to ask you—

The Convener: Quickly.

Mary Fee: I will be quick.

If we moved towards a set of standards for consideration in contextualised admissions, would we be better able to assess how the factors are used?

10:45

Professor Scott: That is difficult. University and college admissions will always be a complex business, and a range of factors will always be taken into account. We should try to shift the balance towards greater transparency and away from what is sometimes a rather obscure process for taking decisions. We will never be able to achieve an industrialised process in which boxes are ticked and things can be done by a computer algorithm. University admission should never be like that. The individual has to come into it, and personal decisions are important. It is inevitable that that will involve a degree of subjectivity. As I said, we should try to shift as much as possible towards greater transparency.

Mary Fee: I will be very brief with my second question, which is about students with disabilities. Although young people with disabilities are mentioned in the report, there is not a huge focus on them; that is particularly true of young British Sign Language users. I would be interested in your comments on that.

In Equalities and Human Rights Committee evidence, I heard that there is a disconnect between the application process that a young person with a disability goes through and the process that they go through to ensure that they will have the funding and support that they need when they get to university, and that that quite often prevents young people from going to the university that they want to go to. I am thinking in particular of our older universities, because it may be more difficult for them to provide the physical and emotional support that young people need. Do you intend to make recommendations or progress on that?

Professor Scott: In my first annual report, I focused very much on the current issues, which to some degree had been set by the commission's report and by Universities Scotland's response. I addressed the same list of things, but I tried to flag up other issues that I would like to come back to, one of which was other forms of disadvantage.

Disability is a very important form of disadvantage, and it comes in many different forms, of course. You mentioned physical disability. That raises a particular set of issues, for which concrete provision quite often needs to be made. However, there are other forms of disability. Perhaps the most common form now—it is, of course, a growing form—is dyslexia in some form or other. Institutions that were probably rather insensitive to that in the past are now much more sensitive to it and will make adjustments, and they are relatively easy adjustments to make.

Each form of disability needs different remedies, as different forms of social disadvantage need

different remedies. Again, the picture is complex, but I would certainly like to come back to that in my future annual reports.

Mary Fee: It is interesting that you mentioned dyslexia. Universities are quite willing to accommodate and assist people with dyslexia, but young people with perhaps more profound disabilities are being excluded. I would like to see more progress being made in that area.

Professor Scott: I would support that. Obviously, the issue of cost comes into it, particularly if old buildings are involved. Making old buildings accessible to people with a physical disability can be a very expensive business. Making the adjustments that are required for dyslexic students is probably much cheaper. Obviously, universities will consider that, as well.

There is also a role for legislation. Many forms of disability are covered by legislation, and all organisations are required to make appropriate adjustments to meet the needs of disabled people.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. My question is a pretty simple one, but the area is probably a minefield. Many people with disabilities will probably be in the SIMD 20 category. Universities such as the University of the West of Scotland in my Paisley constituency and Glasgow Caledonian University constantly get over the 20 per cent mark for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They do not just tick the box; they get over that mark, and they have done so for a number of years. If we compare them to other, more established universities, why is that? The question is quite simple. How do they manage to do that, when other universities seem to struggle?

Professor Scott: You are right to point out that there is quite a variable record between different institutions, but we have to take into account the demand for a particular university. Appearing to make exceptions for students because they have certain social characteristics is probably more challenging for a university that is forced to be quite selective about the students that it admits than it is for one where demand is more limited and which, essentially, would admit all reasonably well-qualified students. The challenge is harder, in a sense, for more selective institutions than it is for institutions such as those that you mentioned—UWS and Glasgow Caledonian.

Having said that, there are examples of institutions that are pretty selective and research intensive but that, nevertheless, have done rather well in terms of meeting SIMD 20 targets. It is probably rather invidious to mention them, but I think that Stirling, Strathclyde, Heriot-Watt to some extent, and Glasgow School of Art—which you would not naturally expect to be that good at that—have done well on the whole. There are other institutions for which, on the face of it, there is a less clear reason why they have not made so much progress. They probably need to be challenged a bit more.

George Adam: Yes. In my time on the committee, in the previous session and this, we seem to have gone round in circles. Certain universities say, "Here is our young person from a disadvantaged background," whereas Glasgow Caledonian and UWS are hitting the figures and doing it. There is an argument, which is made in most cases by post-1992 institutions, for funding support. Those young people are coming from poorer backgrounds and maybe chaotic lifestyles—-not so much themselves, but in their families—as well as dealing with all the other challenges that they face day in and day out. After year 1, when the drop in support tends to happen, that lifestyle and everything that it involves is still there. The institutions would make an argument for funding and would say that we should look at some way of supporting them. What is your opinion on that scenario?

Professor Scott: I think that I am right to say that in the past the funding council made some financial adjustments. It is a difficult issue. From the perspective of an ancient university, it could be seen that they are somehow being penalised because their students do not have such chaotic lifestyles. However, I agree that we should take into account the extra costs that can be involved in the support of such students. I think that that needs to be addressed in a twin-track way, through institutional funding but also with financial support for the students themselves. The Scottish Government commissioned a report on student finance—it was published last November, I think—and a Government response to it will presumably be forthcoming fairly soon. I would like to come back to that issue.

Generally, however—not just in Scotland but across the UK—the approach has been that funding for teaching students should be relatively formulaic. It should take into account the cost of teaching a subject, so there would clearly be more for medicine than for history, but apart from that it should not take into account different characteristics of the student body. Of course, you could make the counter-argument that it should take into account the kind of students that are recruited. If they are more expensive to teach because of some of the reasons that have been mentioned, that should be reflected in a kind of premium for the institution.

George Adam: We could call it inverted snobbery or whatever, but someone might have the academic ability to go to one of the ancient universities but not apply because of their background. They might feel more comfortable at

certain institutions. Would that not be down to something simple—not so much pounds, shillings and pence, but how we go about recruiting young people at certain institutions?

Professor Scott: Again, that is a very difficult issue. Let us take the example of the University of St Andrews. It is very proud of the fact that it was established in 1413 and it makes a lot of that. On certain occasions, students there parade around in red gowns. That is probably not an image that some people want to be associated with—it sends out quite a strong cultural message. A university such as St Andrews that prides itself on its traditions needs to take into account the fact that that might act as a bit of a put-off for certain applicants. Such universities need to work a bit harder to prove to those people that they would fit in and would be welcome there.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I want to look at the wider issues that affect access. We are all well aware that rising public transport costs and issues with the private rented sector can affect retention. That relates to Ruth Maguire's point. How able have you felt to address those wider issues that fall outwith the education portfolios?

Professor Scott: There have to be some limits to my remit. You are absolutely right to say that people's lives are not self-contained. Public transport issues are crucial when it comes to how easy it is for people to get to university or college. What it will cost to do that has a big impact on whether someone will go there in the first place or be able to afford to stay there. However, I am not quite sure what boundaries could be set, because many other factors would need to be taken into account. Health is obviously an issue, too.

On the whole, I do not think that I should find myself feeling obliged to comment on issues such as public transport costs or health policy in Scotland, because my role would become too diffuse.

Ross Greer: You are probably right about that, but how can the Government take a holistic approach? Tremendous progress can be made through the work that you are doing in following through on the commission's recommendations, but unless a holistic approach is taken—I think that you used the word "holistic" earlier—we will not reach the targets that we want to be achieved. How should that holistic approach be advanced? The issue of access does not apply only to your work—it affects a range of Government departments, agencies and public policy areas that are far outwith your remit—but there needs to be some level of connection.

Professor Scott: As I see it, the role of commissioner for fair access was conceived in such a way that the term "holistic" applies to the education system. I agree that there are no firm boundaries to the education system, but I am very aware that if there were to be too great a focus on colleges and universities—the traditional universities, in particular—the bigger picture would be missed. It is really important to understand what is going on in schools and what the issues are there. One of my priorities in the current year is to focus more on issues in schools.

Some of the outreach initiatives that are undertaken by universities attempt to reach students at quite a young age—in primary school—and try to involve their parents. On the whole, the evidence that exists on that, such as it is, shows that that approach is pretty effective, because it familiarises people with the idea that going to university is not a strange experience after all. I certainly think that it is important to look holistically across the whole of education. Inevitably, that will bring in some aspects of social care, but I must set some limits, otherwise I would end up commenting on why society is unequal. Although I have personal views about that, I am not sure that they are relevant in this context.

Ross Greer: The committee could—indeed, it will—have an exceptionally long discussion about that at some point.

You made an interesting point about universities reaching out to children at an early age and that approach being successful. From what you have seen so far, does that require a certain level of buy-in at local authority level? Does the approach vary from local authority to local authority, or is it more a case of individual headteachers taking the initiative when it comes to university outreach?

Professor Scott: I think that local authorities play an important role. What they do is very important in raising school attainment levels. I am very struck by the success of schools in Glasgow in raising educational attainment levels. Inevitably, that has a knock-on effect in making fair access easier for the universities that are based there.

In the UK, it is interesting that the same has happened in London, where school attainment levels have increased substantially. We need to look at those local variations and the role of local education authorities to find out why school attainment levels seem to have increased substantially in certain areas through concerted efforts, whereas other areas have had less success. That clearly sets the platform on which fair access to higher education is built.

11:00

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I will follow up on Ross Greer's questions about transport and housing and their role with regard to student support. I am interested in your thoughts

on that, particularly on how student finance impacts on access targets and people's desire to undertake studies.

Professor Scott: I certainly do not say that those matters are unimportant. I have referred to the review of student financial support that was published last November, which focused on direct financial support to students, such as loans or grants, which are important. Such things as the availability of housing and transport are also crucial.

Universities invest a lot in building student accommodation, but much of that is addressed to the needs of young adult students who are aged 18 to 21 or 22, although increasingly the universities also bear in mind conference business. If a student commutes from home, the availability of housing is not important but the availability of transport is very important. Different groups of students have a different balance of needs, which makes a complex picture.

Oliver Mundell: My point was that, if the right financial support package is in place, some of the issues around housing and transport become that bit easier. I am interested in your thoughts on the review and the importance of student support to ensure that people from the targeted backgrounds want and feel able to go to university.

Professor Scott: Student finances are crucial. In my discussions with students, they have always mentioned money. That is not surprising, but it is always at the forefront of people's minds. Financial stress is often a significant factor in drop-out or lack of success by students. Clearly, the perception that university might be expensive and the fact that people do not know where the money will come from will discourage people from applying in the first place. I deliberately did not say very much about that in my annual report, because a separate report on student support had been published only a few weeks before, to which the Government had not responded directly. The Government has still not responded, so it is probably right for me to wait to see what response it makes.

A general observation is that a complaint that is often made is that poorer students end up graduating with higher levels of debt than students from more advantaged backgrounds. That is almost inevitable with any loans-based system; exactly the same happens in England and in all countries that have a loans-based system of student support. The only way to address that would be to have generous support of students grants, which I benefited from when I was a student, but that is very expensive and Governments have competing priorities. I would like to return to those issues when I have seen the Government's response to the specific recommendations that were made in the student support review.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I come back to two things that you have mentioned: certain universities not recognising higher national qualifications—as a former college lecturer, I have spent a lot of my life complaining about that—and the fact that some colleges are not doing any access or bridging programmes or outreach. You have made recommendations, but I sense that you want the SFC to take a role in identifying the universities that are not making the inroads that others are and to say that that is not acceptable. Does it have the heft to be able to do that?

Professor Scott: That is why I made the recommendation. Our starting point should always be that, as the default position, an HND is a two-year, full-time higher education qualification and that, if a student transfers into a degree programme, it should be into year 3. That will not always be possible—they might have changed subject, or the approach within the HN might be different from that within the degree programme. However, we should not start with all the difficulties.

Sometimes, such discussions talk about how it is all very difficult. We should start from the other end. We should say that it should be possible and that, if there are difficulties, we will discuss them, see how valid they are and, if they are valid, decide how we address them. There are good examples of universities and colleges working together across HNs and degrees to ensure better compatibility of approaches and content, so good practice exists. It is just a question of generalising it and perhaps adopting a slightly more positive approach rather than saying that it is all very difficult.

Gillian Martin: I do not think that it is difficult. There is evidence from the universities and colleges that are working together on the success of college students with a higher national qualification, who do quite well at university. Why do some universities not recognise that evidence? What is the sticking point? What are their arguments against it?

Professor Scott: It is often subject based. In engineering and, to some extent, business studies and management, there is a better understanding of how HNs and degrees fit together; in other areas, it is more difficult. Obviously, there are other areas in which there is no HN equivalent, so someone who went to university to study a new area would be changing subject entirely.

It is partly to do with the institution. For instance, the University of Strathclyde and Heriot-Watt University come from a higher technical education background. Their history is professional

education. Therefore, their links to, and understanding of, what goes on in colleges are naturally rather better than they would be for the University of St Andrews, which does not have that history.

There are some explanations but it is not enough to look to history and say that we can understand why more people in a certain institution than in another institution understand HNs well. We have to find remedies.

The Convener: Thank you for attending, Professor Scott. It was a useful evidence-taking session.

That brings us to the end of the public part of the meeting. I suspend the meeting while we wait for the public gallery to clear.

11:08

Meeting continued in private until 11:27.

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