EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 7 February 2006

Session 2

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
3rd Meeting 2006, Session 2

CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP)
*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
*John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP)
Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)
Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP)
Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Rowena Arshad (Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council)
Lesley Berry (Skill Scotland)
Geraldine Bradley (Scottish Guidance Association)
Yvonne Brown (learndirect Scotland)
David Caldwell (Universities Scotland)
Rona Connolly (Linking Education and Disability Scotland)
Alison Cox (BRITE Initiative)
Tom Drake (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
Sally Mackintosh (DARE Foundation)
Sue Pinder (Association of Scotland's Colleges)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Zoé Tough

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 7 February 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:02*]

Disability Inquiry

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning and welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's third meeting this year. I remind all those present that mobile phones should be switched off, as they interfere with our sound system. I have apologies from Sandra White, Jamie McGrigor, Elaine Smith, Frances Curran and Marilyn Livingstone.

Agenda item 1 is the first formal evidence session for our disability inquiry on the theme of further and higher education. I am pleased to warmly welcome Sue Pinder from the Association of Scotland's Colleges, Rowena Arshad from the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, Geraldine Bradley from the Scottish Guidance Association, Tom Drake from the Scottish Qualifications Authority and David Caldwell from Universities Scotland. Thank you for coming to give evidence.

We will proceed straight to questions. There is a lot of sickness around, so please forgive the fact that only four members are present this morning, but we still have lots of questions.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): My first questions are primarily for the Scottish Guidance Association. The committee is interested in whether guidance teachers work to specific Scottish Executive or local authority policies or procedures in supporting disabled students at school. How do teachers advise disabled students on their career choices?

Geraldine Bradley (Scottish Guidance Association): I can speak only from personal experience. I am a principal teacher of pastoral care at Scotland's largest secondary school—Holyrood secondary school—which has more than 2,000 pupils, of whom a very small number have special needs. Most linking with colleges and universities in relation to special needs involves collaborating with the principal teacher of support for learning, whose job is to link with colleges. We also have a deputy head teacher who is in charge of social inclusion and who has links with colleges. We all work in collaboration; it is not simply a matter for the guidance teacher on their own.

Marlyn Glen: Have policies or procedures that you must follow been laid down?

Geraldine Bradley: Not that I am aware of; I would have to check that.

Marlyn Glen: That would help.

How does the association support its members to ensure that disabled students receive a person-centred careers service that matches their career choices, interests and aspirations?

Geraldine Bradley: The association is a voluntary group that was formed by guidance teachers throughout Scotland. Its committee has 12 members who meet every two months. Our main job is to form a network. We organise a workshop day and a conference day, to which we invite external speakers. That is our only way of providing information to guidance teachers.

Marlyn Glen: That is helpful information for the committee.

Geraldine Bradley: If the Scottish Executive were to put a specific proposal to us, we could invite a speaker to the conference or the workshop days.

Marlyn Glen: We can certainly consider suggesting that to the minister. As an ex-teacher, I am aware of the overload to which teachers can be subject.

Geraldine Bradley: The meetings take place on Saturday mornings, so teachers are volunteering their own time.

Marlyn Glen: Is any training and support given to staff who advise young disabled people on career choices?

Geraldine Bradley: Not at the moment. Currently, people simply volunteer to provide guidance. Training courses on guidance are available at various colleges, but some staff are training on the job, so to speak, by attending external in-service courses. I am not sure whether members are aware of the fact that in recent years the guidance structure has changed totally. Guidance teachers are rather thin on the ground at the moment.

Marlyn Glen: I realise that there are many problems. It is interesting to pick out where there are obvious gaps. Can you tell us where teachers can source information at the moment?

Geraldine Bradley: I cannot. I will have to check that.

Marlyn Glen: It would be helpful if you could find out whether there is a place where teachers can source information on different impairments and their effect on a person's ability to study a particular course or to follow a particular career path.

Geraldine Bradley: We obviously have links with the careers service, which comes into schools. We also organise further education fairs and so on. The experts are invited into schools on a regular basis. However, in my school there are very few pupils who have special needs. The link is through support for learning.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Would you expect people in the careers service to have more training than guidance teachers in advising disabled students on career options?

Geraldine Bradley: The job of a guidance teacher is to be responsible for the personal curriculum of and to provide vocational care for all pupils, so obviously we link up with other agencies at the relevant times. I have one Down's syndrome pupil who is linking up with the local college. As a fifth-year pupil, she attends college part time and school part time. I have had links with the careers service and local colleges in her case.

Nora Radcliffe: Was it easy for you to get the information that you needed to deal with the child's condition?

Geraldine Bradley: I liaised with other people in the school, such as the educational psychologist. We are breaking new ground for a mainstream school.

Nora Radcliffe: Do you feel that the support was available when you needed it and that you knew where to get it?

Geraldine Bradley: Eventually we found it. There were no set criteria for dealing with pupils with special needs. The child has a record of needs that sets the standard, and there are regular annual meetings in which the psychologist is involved. When the child reaches 16, there is a future needs assessment that involves the educational psychologist and the careers service, but we are finding our way as we go along.

Nora Radcliffe: It is useful for us to know that. Perhaps someone can do something about it.

Marlyn Glen: I am aware that everything has changed, because we no longer have records of needs.

Geraldine Bradley: No. It is all changing.

Marlyn Glen: It is good for us to pick up the specifics of the problem, because we have been looking at it from different points of view.

Geraldine Bradley: We hope that the new additional support for learning legislation will help. It should allow people in the national health service, education, further education colleges and social work to access information on pupils—to tag them and check their needs.

Marlyn Glen: At its previous evidence-taking session, the committee heard that employers should be involved in the provision of careers advice. At present, what role do employers play in careers advice? Is there merit in including employers at the stage when advice is being provided?

Sue Pinder (Association of Scotland's Colleges): Yes, there is a role for employers. One matter of concern to colleges is that the programmes that are designed for our students interface properly with career choices. It is important that employers are involved, so we understand what is necessary at different stages and can build it into a programme's design and structure. Scotland's colleges support involving employers in careers advice.

David Caldwell (Universities Scotland): I strongly support Sue Pinder's comments. Employability is an important issue for universities. We are keen to see the right employment opportunities for all students. We recognise that disabled students face additional issues. It is important that there is a clear understanding of the usefulness of disabled graduates in employment. A partnership approach in which employers can be involved as early as possible and understand the benefits that employing disabled graduates can bring to them is therefore the best option. I am supportive of bringing employers in at an early stage.

Tom Drake (Scottish Qualifications Authority): We work very closely with employers in the development of qualifications, particularly vocational qualifications such as the higher national Scottish vocational qualification. We work with the sector skills councils that have responsibility for developing the national occupational standards on which those qualifications are based. There is a need to concentrate on ensuring that the qualifications and the national occupational standards do not contain artificial barriers to progression and to gaining qualifications. That is a substantial issue.

Rowena Arshad (Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council): We support that approach because, as a funding council, we have a role in bridging and disseminating good practice. David Caldwell mentioned partnership processes, in which we actively assist.

However, this is not just about informing employers so that they can be more creative and inclusive in their practices. In exemplifying good practice, we can show where moulds have been and can be broken. Employers have been forward thinking and progressive. The knock-on effect is that those examples can be used for careers officers and guidance colleagues in schools.

On your first question, concerning schools and guidance, it would be helpful to urge education authorities to remember to mainstream disability rights when they write up their work schemes. That means that personal education plan—PEP—teachers and school management can consider how disability issues should be mainstreamed into all aspects of their work, including support and guidance. That would leave a degree of coherence rather than ad hoc practices.

Geraldine Bradley: We have many links with employers as part of teaching. We invite employers to the school to speak to pupils at key stages in progression and options choices, at the end of second, fourth and fifth year. Employers are also involved in industrial awareness days. Recently, second year pupils attended the make it in Scotland conference in Hampden Park, where they were given the opportunity to find out more about manufacturing jobs. All pupils at particular stages are eligible to go to such events.

We also run the work experience programme, which includes pupils with special needs. They can put their details on the WorkNet website, where employers can find them if they are willing to take pupils with special needs. From my experience, all pupils, no matter their needs, are afforded the same opportunities, as far as we can allow them to do so.

Marlyn Glen: Written evidence from the DARE Foundation and Skill Scotland suggests that each local authority should have an officer or key worker with specific responsibility for careers advice and transition support to disabled people. What do the witnesses think about that suggestion?

10:15

Geraldine Bradley: That would be useful.

Sue Pinder: Throughout Scotland, the colleges experience excellent partnerships at local level. As the creation of such a role would enhance those partnerships, I think that there would be quite a bit of support for that proposal.

Marlyn Glen: I am interested in linking that suggestion to the idea of mainstreaming. There seems to be a tension in that although everyone wants to mainstream, when we talk to people on the ground they want a one-to-one expert. Do you feel that further and higher education providers are working towards mainstreaming in their provision?

Sue Pinder: The starting point for colleges is that we are providers of education, training and quality learning. If our processes work for all students, there is a much better chance that they will work for students who have different needs.

There has been a lot of talk about mainstreaming, but we must be careful to ensure that individuals who are in mainstream programmes are well supported. We must provide the opportunity both for mainstream work and for supported work so that people can move betwixt and between the two so that they get the best of both worlds.

In colleges, there is a strong drive towards mainstreaming all activity that might originally have been aimed at disabled learners. There are no barriers to disabled learners joining mainstream programmes. The key point is whether someone is on the right course or programme and, if they are, what needs to be done to ensure that they can follow it. We must bear in mind that some people require much more prolonged and sustained support. A good balance is emerging on mainstreaming in Scotland's colleges.

David Caldwell: Achieving the right balance between dedicated support and mainstreaming is a core issue. My strong inclination is that we should move towards as much mainstreaming as possible. All learners are individuals who have individual needs. That applies to disabled students who have certain highly specific needs. If we can adopt the approach of ensuring that all our learners have their individual needs met as effectively as possible without any group suffering disadvantage, that is the right way to go.

We are conscious that there is work to be done on awareness raising, especially in relation to disability. It is right to have a certain amount of dedicated support so that we can work towards mainstreaming. That has to be the target.

Rowena Arshad: I support what has been said. At this stage, a mixture of a discrete approach and a permeative approach is needed. Those of us who have been involved in equal opportunities for a long time know that mainstreaming will not happen just like that, because the same people who did the job yesterday will be doing it today. There is a need to build up expertise.

I refer to the self-evaluation toolkit that the council, the colleges and the universities have put together, which is in annex B of our submission. It deals not just with the mainstreaming of courses, but with strategic management mainstreaming and how an institution can incorporate mainstreaming in its recruitment and selection process. Mainstreaming needs to happen across the board: it is not just about the physical location of people and it should not be considered as an afterthought.

The Convener: Is there a need to promote greater awareness of the issue among providers of courses, for example? During our evidence taking, we have found that awareness is patchy in some areas.

Rowena Arshad: I think that that is right. Institutions and their members of staff are beginning to have to think systematically. In my university, for example, we have a handy checklist to assist students with dyslexia, which staff put up on their walls. We need many such tools because there are numerous different needs. The checklist is accessible. That is what I like about the toolkit. If the institutions work through it, it saves people having to go through screeds and screeds of information. If we adopt tools that are neat and accessible, awareness will start to grow. In addition, we need to listen to students more, so that they become the teachers as well.

Tom Drake: There is a need to join up all the expertise, going right back to the start of the programme. We are designing qualifications at all levels to ensure that expertise can feed back from the deliverers—from schools, colleges and universities—into the design process. If we take account of the expertise that has been built up, we can develop an understanding of the particular problems that particular disabilities bring and of how they can be overcome.

The Convener: I would like to consider the nature of the courses in a bit more detail. At its consultation events, the committee heard about pretendy courses, with no meaningful outcomes. Written evidence from the DARE Foundation states:

"colleges are at risk of becoming new day centres, accommodating people who are unlikely to achieve academically."

The committee recognises that such courses might be appropriate in certain circumstances, but can your organisations do more to ensure that students have sufficient choices in the courses that they attend?

Sue Pinder: That is a real concern for colleges. When we have discussed the matter at the ASC, a number of colleges have expressed concern about the growing view that colleges might become the new day centres. There are a couple of things that I would say in response. We try to keep to the forefront the fact that, essentially, colleges are about economic inclusion. That is as true for disabled students as it is for all other students.

We must accept, however, that there are some students for whom there is no opportunity of employment at the moment—or perhaps ever. We need to think of other ways to engage them in learning that allows them to engage properly in and contribute to their communities. That is why a lot of colleges have developed far greater networks with community outreach organisations and other partners in their areas. They are working collectively to provide programmes that are not meaningless and that offer progression. Obviously, however, that progression must be paced according to the rate at which learners can make progress within the programmes.

One of the great dilemmas for colleges stems from the fact that they have now been charged with the social inclusion agenda and with focusing on personal development skills, independent living and community awareness. There is a significant contradiction in doing that within a college. We take people out of their communities, bring them into a college and work with them to develop the skills that they will need in the community. We very rarely provide in a joined-up way the experiences that would allow those skills to be transferred so that people could make positive contributions.

Nevertheless, I think that there is significant awareness of the issues among the colleges, and a lot more progress is being made through working with community partners. There is also a great deal more joined-up thinking, which should prevent colleges from becoming the new day centres with meaningless programmes.

The Convener: I am pleased to hear that, but people are telling us that the courses are the same every year and that they feel that they are being sidelined. You feel that that will change or that it is changing.

Sue Pinder: It is changing. Colleges have moved away from special needs programmes, departments or sectors, and are instead concentrating on inclusiveness and inclusion. That has greater breadth and more resonance for how people live and work in communities. That change will be slow, and there are issues of affordability. Many of the programmes that would be needed to make that transition happen more quickly would be resource intensive. We have to remember that colleges operate on very tight margins.

There is also the issue of entitlement. To reiterate a question that the committee raised earlier, how do we get people to understand that such provision is available for them? How do we get the message to carers, parents and guardians? The Association of Scotland's Colleges believes strongly that we ought to push entitlement using some sort of lifetime learning account, which would be particularly beneficial to disabled learners in the context that you describe.

Tom Drake: We develop our qualifications in consultation with end users—employers, colleges, universities and schools—to ensure that they offer a meaningful challenge. We put all our qualifications into the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. Any framework has to provide an entry level as well as an exit level.

We are developing a qualifications framework that has vertical challenge so that people can progress upwards at their own pace or progress

sideways and develop additional skills if, for example, they are not able to progress upwards because of the level of challenge. Nothing is developed on its own in a backroom. The framework is being developed in conjunction with the field and we are identifying what is needed for people at all stages of development.

The Convener: Does the SQA think that there should be more vocational courses, perhaps developed with the support of employers who provide placements?

Tom Drake: All vocational qualifications are developed in partnership with employers. They are based on national occupational standards or, at least, are closely linked to them. The link has been enshrined for a number of years.

The Convener: I understand that pilot courses are running in 2005-06. Will you tell me a bit more about them?

Tom Drake: Do you mean the skills for work courses?

The Convener: Yes.

Tom Drake: The courses are being piloted this year in a number of areas. We have courses in construction at intermediate 1, in early education and child care at intermediate 1 and 2, in financial services at intermediate 2 and in sports and recreation at intermediate 1. About 150 schools are involved in the pilot and they are working with further education colleges to deliver the qualifications.

We will enter the second phase of the skills for work project next year. We will extend construction courses to intermediate 2 and we will introduce hairdressing at intermediate 1, rural skills at intermediate 1 and sports and recreation at intermediate 2. There will be a considerable increase in the availability of those courses.

The Convener: What recognition is there that disabled students will require additional support to be able to participate in those courses?

Tom Drake: They are designed for all students who are interested in them, but they are particularly useful for disabled candidates who seek a taster of what it is like to operate in the work environment. We hope that, in many cases, the courses will give students the encouragement that they need to understand that they are able to go into full-time employment.

The Convener: That seems to be one of the barriers. So many people, from parents to people in education, think that disabled students are unable to go into work. The courses will perhaps do something to break down some of those barriers.

Tom Drake: There are clear attitudinal barriers. As the national qualifications body, we have a responsibility to do as much as we can to raise awareness in schools of the need to draw as many candidates as possible into the programmes. We must say not, "You are not able to do this," but, "Why not try this and see how you get on?" That is our approach, given that the support is available that will be needed to get some candidates through.

Geraldine Bradley: As guidance teachers, our aim is to include every child and to push them to achieve their full potential. Every child is encouraged to achieve their best and we link with the SQA. I work in a large school and we have pupils doing access 3 courses. Others are progressing to advanced highers, so there is a breadth of available qualifications.

The Convener: It is good to hear that, but that is not what we are hearing from disabled students and disabled young people. They are telling us that there are still barriers that it seems impossible to overcome. That is why we are asking questions about what is happening and what can change.

Geraldine Bradley: I can speak only from my own experience.

Rowena Arshad: I return to the point about examples of good practice. Good practice can be a sop because some people think, "What is good practice for me might not be good practice for you." However, a lot of good stuff is going on. An example that I picked up on when I was preparing for the meeting is the work that is being done with the sector skills councils to engage employers. Disabled students who want to get into the milk production industries are finding places that are accessible so that they can get on with milk production, which is what they want to do.

We should learn lessons from other equality areas, such as minority issues, where there has been protective channelling. It is not that people want the worst, but that they assume that they know what is best but do not see what is best through the eyes of the recipients, who in this case are disabled students. By sharing good practice, we can give people hope and open up possibilities. We must keep on that track; the SFHEFC wants to go down that route with our range of partners. We cannot close our eyes to the attitudinal issues, but all of us are also aware of institutional issues. The individual can go so far, but the institution must meet them. That is what the toolkit and the various efforts of colleagues around the table aim to achieve.

10:30

Sue Pinder: A point that is worth mentioning is the range of college courses that now include a

work placement, especially among the programmes for disabled youngsters. A placement is invaluable because many of those young people cannot express themselves very well in job interviews, but if they are on a college programme that includes a work placement, a significant number of them secure employment through that route. A work placement with support from the college has become a powerful way of breaking down some of the barriers.

The Convener: I want to explore the work placement in more detail. How do organisations work with employers to ensure that people with certain impairments, which would disqualify them from either completing practical work experience or gaining jobs in the relevant occupations, are not on such courses? For example, we have heard from young students who participated in caring courses but were not able to do the work placement that would lead to the qualification. It seems appalling that people are encouraged to do a course that leads nowhere—we are back to pretendy courses. I am interested in how relevant and well thought out the work experience is for the students.

Sue Pinder: I have heard of such cases. It is regrettable that that has happened, but what you would now find in colleges is that the guidance and the induction to programmes for all learners—especially for learners who have particular needs—have become much better and more refined over the past two or three years. There has been a great deal of development in that area and that stage of the process has started to work better.

Tom Drake talked about the design, construction and structure of programmes. The engagement of employers and different support agencies at that stage has ensured that such errors are less frequent now than they perhaps were in the past. We have different types of access programmes for learners; for example, someone can come on an access programme for nursing or child care before embarking on the vocational programme. That means that they can try it out, experience a work placement and iron out some of the issues that might arise as a result of their physical impairment. The situation that you mention is less likely to arise now because programmes are better managed in the colleges and the college sector has better relationships with employers. Employers are involved at every stage in the curriculum and they are involved with what happens with learners in colleges. I am confident that such situations do not arise anything like as much as they did a few years ago.

The Convener: The case that I mentioned happened this year.

Sue Pinder: I take your point.

Tom Drake: We provide guidance on these issues to colleges and to schools to try to prevent such things from happening. We have a long history of engaging with colleges, in particular with the further education sector, to consider particular cases to see what can be done to try to work round particular problems, should they emerge. We are happy to work with our colleagues in the further education sector to do that and many colleges take full advantage of that option.

Nora Radcliffe: I want to talk about the transition from school to further or higher education. We have heard in evidence that the transition should be seamless for young disabled people. However, the transition does not seem to happen in a seamless way. We hear that disabled people still face considerable barriers to accessing further and higher education. Last year the Executive published "Partnership Matters: A Guide to Local Authorities, NHS Boards and Voluntary Organisations on Supporting Students with Additional Needs in Further Education". How do your organisations work together with other partners to try to achieve a seamless transition from school to further or higher education?

Sue Pinder: There are close links between schools, colleges and local authorities—we have always worked with young people before they wish to come to college, either part or full-time, so we have a fair amount of knowledge about their background and needs. As I said, the difficulty is that we provide the programme and if the person performs well and achieves, that is fine, but that is only one part of the jigsaw. Colleges must work in partnership with a range of agencies to enable learners to attend, but that partnership is often not as effective as it might be. We need much more coherence in that.

An issue for learners can be the support that they require when they come to college. Colleges are simply not geared up to offer the whole gamut of support that people with fairly complex needs might require. We have a dilemma: on the one hand, we must be honest and say that we are not geared up to support certain individuals but, on the other, we must do everything possible to ensure that individuals are referred to the agencies that provide support. Where the system works, it works well, but there will always be slip-ups. We need greater coherence and a way of enabling support to be provided much more effectively than it is at present.

Nora Radcliffe: To take a punt, the structures that exist are probably there because certain individuals have worked hard to put them in place. Is there a lack of a structure to establish the partnerships that are needed to involve external agencies in providing support?

Sue Pinder: I would not say that there is a lack of structure. Rather, there are conflicting priorities for different agencies. That is a key point. We should remember that people's needs change at different stages of their personal development and journey through life. A person's needs for learning in school might be different from those that they have when they come into the much more challenging environment of a college. For example, their transport needs might be more pressing. Colleges cannot address such pressing needs on their own, which is why we need a much more coherent partnership model.

David Caldwell: The universities, too, believe that liaison with schools is extremely important. It is desirable that the transition between school and university is as smooth as possible, although I am entirely unashamed about the fact that a university experience is different from a school experience; that is part of the point of it, which is why I am always a little nervous about the use of terms such as "seamless". In some respects, we want the transition to be seamless, but we should recognise that we want it to be a step upwards in other respects. However, in relation to practical issues, we want the transition to be as seamless as possible.

One key issue for universities is that we should encourage those who are thinking of coming to a university to visit the institution in advance. People are understandably nervous about moving to a new stage in their life but, if they visit the institution, they generally find that it is not as intimidating as they expected it to be. A visit is especially important for students with disabilities, not just because it gets over the intimidation that they might feel, but because it is a valuable practical opportunity to find out what adaptations may be necessary to ensure that they get the full benefit of the experience of being at university. We offer particularly strong encouragement and expert support. People in admissions offices are increasingly aware of the need to consider carefully the specific needs of individual disabled students who are applying for entry.

The point was made that barriers still exist. I am sure that there are still barriers that need to be pushed at a little harder, but the statistical evidence is that the ratio of applications of disabled students to admissions is as good as the ratio for the population as a whole. There is no statistical evidence that disabled students who apply to university are finding it more difficult to get in than are other students; nor is there a significant discrepancy between the proportion of disabled people in universities and that in the general population. I am not saying that there is nothing still to be done, but we have done a lot to eliminate or minimise disadvantage and, although we can still do a bit more, a lot of progress has been made.

Nora Radcliffe: I want to follow up the point about encouraging students to come early to universities to familiarise themselves with the practicalities. Do you have mechanisms in place that flag up the fact that certain students might need to come early enough to allow time for the thinking to be done about how they move about the campus and for the adaptations and technology to be put in place to allow them access to learning? Does any mechanism flag up the fact that for certain people there will need to be time to get all that in place for September, when they are supposed to start, instead of December, January or February?

David Caldwell: Yes. That is one way in which having an admissions season that starts relatively early is an advantage. That is one of the reasons why I am not a great enthusiast for post-qualification application, which is attracting a certain amount of support south of the border at present. The great advantage of the present system is that the large majority of students applying for undergraduate entry have their applications into the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service by the middle of December. The standard UCAS form asks those students who have disabilities to declare them. It is important that we give applicants every possible assurance that they will be in no way disadvantaged if they declare a disability, because there is reluctance on the part of some to declare a disability. If a disability is declared, our processes are good for considering how the university in question can best make provision for the student. The issue is flagged up. There might be a residual problem with some applicants not declaring their disability; we need to give them the confidence to do so without fear that they will suffer disadvantage.

Nora Radcliffe: That issue was raised in evidence to us.

Rowena Arshad: There are two points to make from the funding council's perspective. One is that we have widening access forums, which are wide ranging and include schools, colleges, universities and local partners. A key feature of their work is addressing transition issues, one facet of which is outreach work to disabled learners. We are funding those forums, which enables that work to be done.

The other point is that we are now funding the bridging project, which looks at articulation routes—subject-specific routes or curriculum-focused routes. It is not only about students with disabilities but about all students who are articulating between courses in different institutions. Sue Pinder said at the outset that if we get it right, we probably get it right for everybody.

The bridging project aims to make the transition into university easier for people with higher national diplomas. If somebody with a disability who has chosen to go to very local provision such as a college because of its proximity or the ease of transport wants to move on to the university sector, that transition must be smooth.

10:45

Nora Radcliffe: Do you have comments on how adaptations and equipment such as specially tailored computers are funded? Could funding be dealt with better? For example, a specially adapted computer might be bought for somebody in an institution and might stay in the institution although that person had moved on. Does that happen?

Sue Pinder: Colleges have received what we call Beattie money from the funding council, which has been used well throughout the college sector to provide adaptive technologies—particularly in information technology—for students. We also have resources to call on through the Beattie resources for inclusiveness in technology and education centre at Stevenson College, for example. I have not encountered the situation that you describe.

David Caldwell: The new technology has been a great boon to significant numbers of disabled students, as it has made special arrangements easier to achieve. Some improvements could probably be made to the funding arrangements as I understand them. Some benefits are funded through the disabled students allowance. I hear reports that payment of that allowance is sometimes not as prompt as it might be and that there is scope for improvement. Another issue is that some students are eligible for the DSA whereas others are not. In practice, universities—and colleges, I suspect—do their best to ensure that provision is still made for students who are ineligible for the DSA. The system is working reasonably well but, as ever with administrative systems, scope for improvement exists.

Rowena Arshad: It is inevitable that it will be asked whether the different funding methodologies are effective. From the funding council's perspective, it is fair to say that a range of premiums is being reviewed, including premiums for issues such as isolation, remoteness and widening access, and disability is obviously one of those issues. However, the whole funding methodology for sectors could be up for examination.

The only reason for reviewing the funding methodologies is to improve, and finding the way to do that takes time. Disability and the needs of students with disabilities will have to be a factor in the review of methodologies, to achieve more parity, congruence and coherence in the system because, as David Caldwell said, the packages that are offered to colleges are different from those for universities. We can achieve that aim only with extensive consultation.

We also need to wait. The Scottish Executive disabled students stakeholder group, together with universities, is piloting a package for needs-led assessment frameworks and I think that the group will report in autumn 2006. We want to factor all such matters into the review. Suffice it to say that disability issues will be among the factors when the funding council undertakes any review.

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): In relation to the different nature of funding for further education, written evidence from the ASC suggests that

"The basic test should be that the individual deserves a place on the course, rather than what it would cost extra if the student is accepted for that course."

My question is for the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. Will you explain the key differences in the funding systems in further and higher education for disabled people and why they are different? What is the difference between funding for supported courses and that for mainstream courses?

Rowena Arshad: Some of the reasons for the different funding are historical. I do not have all the information, which goes back years. The funding for colleges used to be with local authorities. When that arrangement ended, the Executive or the Scottish Office provided funding streams.

You are right that different funding support systems are available. There is more similarity where fees are concerned. There are waiver schemes for people who study full or part-time and in some cases, the fees are paid on behalf of the student. In further education colleges, students do not pay and in universities, the Student Awards Agency for Scotland takes on the cost. If a student receives the disabled student allowance, they do not have to pay back a graduate endowment. So the fees system is less problematic.

The disabled student allowance is administered by SAAS. There are three categories of allowance. Students who have certain needs will know which category applies to them: the general expenditure category; the non-medical personal help category; and the category for those who require larger items of equipment. Students can access those funds if they meet the needs-led assessment.

We also provide a disabled students premium to universities, but that is calculated according to how many students are in receipt of DSA. That refers to the point that David Caldwell made about encouraging more students to come forward

because many of them do not declare that they have a disability, which means that the universities cannot tap into the premium from the funding council. There is a job to do to raise general awareness.

Colleges have two routes to funding. They have the additional support needs for learning allowance for students as well as the bursary that we provide. There are issues for colleges that arise because of the nature of their courses—many of them are short term and students can begin them at different points in the year. There is a certain amount in the bursaries pot, but it will run out at some point. That is probably where some of the problems lie. If a student starts a course later in the year, they might find that that pot has dried up. It is not fair on the college management if it has to dig into its resources but, equally, it is not fair on the students if their needs are not being met.

The Scottish funding council is aware of all those concerns. When I said that we review methodology, I meant that we have to factor in all those issues.

That is as much as I can say unless you have any particular angles that you want to pick up on.

John Swinburne: My only other point concerns clawback. When students have passed their course, is there any difference between the amount of money clawed back from a disabled student and the amount clawed back from a student who is not disabled?

Rowena Arshad: I cannot answer that right now because I do not have the information to hand, but I can certainly get it to the committee. I would think not, however.

John Swinburne: I would hope not.

Rowena Arshad: I would hope not—that is right. Let me get back to the committee with the correct information.

John Swinburne: The next question is for the whole panel. The committee has received written evidence about the opportunity to bring student funding in as part of the independent living agenda using direct payments. How can that be achieved?

Sue Pinder: For some time, the ASC has advocated a lifetime learning account. That work in progress is at an early stage. If there were any way that we could enter the discussions on funding through the independent living agenda, the ASC would welcome it.

John Swinburne: As no one else wants to contribute, I will continue. Written evidence suggests that the funding of student support is not sufficient and that students have to wait months to get funding sorted out. Additionally, the committee has heard that although some further and higher education providers pay for student assessments, others do not. If that is the case, what can be done to resolve it?

David Caldwell: I will start on that one. It relates to what I was saying earlier about late payment of DSA in some cases. We need to make sure that more work is done on that matter and that there is collaboration with the SAAS in particular to try to ensure that those difficulties are overcome. I am not suggesting that student support is the responsibility of the agencies alone; the issue is partly related to late declarations of disability. If people can be encouraged to make their declarations earlier, that might in itself help to address the problem. There is clearly an issue there.

I am not aware of any significant differences in practice between universities on assessments. One of the benefits of developments in recent decades is that assessment practices have become much more flexible than they used to be. From what I know of practices in individual universities, they all now take a great deal of care to ensure that assessment practices are varied if the standard practice would disadvantage a particular group of students. Clearly, disabled students form a very significant category in that respect.

The number of special assessment arrangements that are made to recognise the specific issues of individual students has substantially multiplied. I am not aware of any differences in practice in the application of charges for special arrangements. If there are any such differences, I suspect that they are now very few and that universities are seeking to eradicate those charges as soon as possible so that all students are treated fairly and in the same way with respect to any financial obligation.

Marlyn Glen: If dyslexia is recognised in a child at school and is dealt with there, without any specific assessment but instead on the basis of knowledge of the pupil, that person might later go to university or college without any written assessment from a psychologist saying that they are dyslexic. They would have been treated as dyslexic at school but will not have any evidence of their dyslexia when they reach university apart from the practice that was applied to them in the past. That perhaps illustrates the problem. The student will have to produce evidence to their university that they are dyslexic, which means that they will have to pay for an assessment. That is the problem, is it not? It is a transition issue.

The Convener: We have heard from students whose dyslexia has been identified only once they have reached university.

Marlyn Glen: That can also be the case, but others cannot—

The Convener: The time involved is also an issue.

Marlyn Glen: Is there any way to get round the problem?

Rowena Arshad: We would have to find out what practices exist in that regard. Working collaboratively, we could achieve that. Should there be differences in practice? One would want to note the best practice and try to achieve it.

Marlyn Glen: There is a link with the SQA here, and this relates to my own background. It is a matter of asking for special arrangements to be made for school pupils.

Rowena Arshad: Yes.

Marlyn Glen: Whatever evidence the SQA accepts, we would expect the college in question to accept it, too.

Rowena Arshad: Yes.

Tom Drake: Every year, we carry out special assessment arrangements for nearly 10,000 candidates, which involves as many as 40,000 to 45,000 individual examinations. That is a firmly established pattern in the schools sector. We do not specifically request a diagnosis. We do not try to second-guess the schools, which know the candidates and make representations to us for special assessment arrangements, and we support them in that process.

John Swinburne: I have a question about information. The committee has heard that students sometimes have difficulty in accessing information about the support that is available, and about courses, funding and various aspects of student life. What can your organisations do to facilitate access to that type of information in accessible formats?

Sue Pinder: That issue is being widely addressed across the college sector. Colleges are investigating the use of one-stop shops to provide information, as well as how their websites are configured, how their prospectuses are delivered and developed and what formats they are available in. At a local level, there is a lot more face-to-face engagement with community and potential student groups, and the facilities to which you alluded are described. A lot of work goes on outwith the college—and in the college once disabled learners come into the college community—to ensure that such information is available.

Colleges are also providing facilities for other agencies to come into the college and offer social, leisure and work support to students. For example, the careers service, Jobcentre Plus and various charitable organisations now have a regular presence in colleges throughout Scotland, and the kind of information about which you ask is permeating a lot more effectively than it used to. However, there is still a long way to go on the format and presentation of information, particularly for visually impaired students.

11:00

David Caldwell: I am happy to say that information is now available in a variety of formats. It is not simply a case of it being available only in the printed prospectus, which is not always easy for every potential student to use or access; information is also available on the internet. However, most important of all is the early visit to the institution, which enables direct contact with an individual. That will not satisfy all information needs, but it is an opportunity for those in the institution who meet the potential student to identify their special information needs and ensure that information in a suitable format is available to them so that they can make an informed choice.

Making an informed choice is one of the key issues. Institutions have developed a great deal the different forms and formats in which they make information available to students who do not find the traditional forms to be suitable for their needs. However, the range of possible formats that might be needed is diverse, which emphasises the importance of the individual approach and the institutional visit, as well as the importance of the institution acknowledging the individual's needs and ensuring that, as far as possible, it customises the information in the way in which the applicant needs it.

Rowena Arshad: It is critical that there is partnership with voluntary organisations that work with people with disabilities and have networks into communities. That is why the concept of key workers within education authorities linking with disability advisers in colleges and co-ordinators in universities is important. In my previous work on access for minority ethnic communities into colleges and universities, I found that it was important to work with key staff in voluntary organisations and let them know things like when the cut-off dates for applying were, how to apply and how to fill in the application form. Those front-line staff can be of tremendous assistance, but they often do not have sufficient information. That is the kind of partnership that David Caldwell and Sue Pinder were talking about, but we can always improve on it. I will take that back to the funding council's widening access forums.

Tom Drake: Like all the other organisations represented, the SQA has worked hard on ensuring that its website meets at least the minimum standards of accessibility—we work with

the Royal National Institute of the Blind on that. We also offer all our qualifications in adapted format on request but, from time to time, we struggle to find freelance subject specialists who have the necessary knowledge to turn the material into a format such as audio or video, particularly if the subject is complex. That market needs to be developed further so that organisations such as the SQA can dip into it and use the services as required. There is a job to be done on that.

Geraldine Bradley: Schools link with colleges and universities through, for example, careers fairs that are held in the evening. Parents and pupils are invited to those to meet representatives of various colleges and universities. That allows parents to find out what special requirements would be available. Guidance staff help with applications and write references for all disabled students. In addition, we would phone the schools link person at a college or university for further information. We can also organise parental interviews for the young people.

Marlyn Glen: Attitudes were touched on earlier. According to those who participated in our consultation events, staff training in disability equality is a way of combating negative attitudes towards disabled people in further and higher education. Do the witnesses agree with that? Is there such training? Can you suggest any other ways of combating negative attitudes towards disabled people?

Sue Pinder: I will kick off on that. First, the number of disabled learners in Scotland's colleges has increased by 64 per cent since 2001. I think that that says something about the colleges' willingness and desire to work with disabled learners. All colleges provided staff training on equality and inclusiveness. They also provide specific training according to the range of students who come into the college. For example, some colleges in Scotland have particular specialisms in autism and staff gain awareness of what that means. That kind of training is widely available and is well supported by staff and the Scottish Further Education Unit, which is establishing an equalities unit. The ASC also promotes such training.

I think that training does make a difference. Taking off my ASC hat and putting on my principal's hat, I have rarely encountered negative attitudes towards disabled learners from staff in my college. What staff sometimes express is a fear that their competence and skills will not allow them to do what is best for a disabled learner. I am sure that the committee will be aware that college staff are passionate about their learners. Although their attitude might appear to be negative, I do not think that it is. Staff ask themselves whether the college is resourced to do its best for a disabled learner and whether they personally can do their best for the learner. They ask whether they are the right or the best person for the job.

We have done extensive training and development in our college and that is mirrored across Scotland's 43 FE colleges. A number of external agencies have aided and abetted that. I think that that training makes a significant difference.

David Caldwell: From the universities' perspective, I agree with much of what Sue Pinder said. Indeed, she made effectively a point that I would have made; namely, that I do not believe that there is a widespread problem of negative attitudes. What is a serious issue is raising awareness. It is not that attitudes are negative; it is that some people have not fully thought through the issue. Staff training is a significant part of the package and awareness training is exactly what it is about. Most universities now have an active awareness-raising training programme for staff about disability in general and about specific disabilities, so that staff have the confidence to which Sue Pinder referred and feel that they can successfully address the issues. A tremendous amount is happening in that area. Indeed, it is one of the most important examples of mainstreaming our approach to disability issues. We ensure that there is a widely disseminated level of awareness in the organisations and a commitment that no student—and certainly no disabled student—will suffer disadvantage.

Rowena Arshad: The project that David Caldwell referred to—which we fund and which I am sure the committee has heard of—is called teachability and, as he says, is being rolled out across the sector. I believe that it will create change. For example, when it comes to language, staff can lack confidence; because people do not want to offend or get something wrong, there are some things that they do not do. We must build up their confidence and skills bases to ensure that they can far more readily adapt their curriculum content and how they teach and support students. We also need a culture change. Students and staff need to be encouraged to declare a disability without feeling penalised for doing so.

The language of awareness raising is also important. After all, this is not merely about needs, but about rights. I should point out that the funding council has also put the matter on the agenda for discussion with the institutions that it works with. For example, we have strategic dialogue sessions with senior managers in colleges and universities; our financial memorandum makes it clear that cognisance needs to be taken of all equalities issues; and we make institutional visits to meet students. As a result, we do our bit to raise awareness and support sustainability.

Tom Drake: We routinely train our staff to ensure that in writing qualifications and developing assessments they look for the pitfalls that the uninitiated might miss if they did not understand the specific needs of a wide range of disabilities. We disseminate that training fairly widely. We must work at the issue in order to improve things. At the moment, we are developing an accessibility tool kit for our staff and others who work for us. We are also working with the Irish, Welsh and English regulatory bodies to develop additional and much more enhanced guidance material on the writing of qualifications and assessments. That work is being led by the Welsh. People understand the need for such a project, which is very much on-going.

Nora Radcliffe: We would now like some feedback on some of our own legislation. How are your organisations working together to implement the provisions of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) Scotland Act 2004, which came into force last year, in order to support young disabled people? Has the act made any difference? Has it made things better or worse, or has it simply passed unnoticed?

David Caldwell: We are still at a fairly early stage; it is perhaps too early to assess how well it is working. As an illustration, the universities are working with Skill Scotland to ensure that institutions have a good understanding of the act's implications.

The 2004 act contains a number of important provisions. I have already mentioned the early visits to college or university; opportunities for early meetings with advisers who can deal with specific issues, needs or—to use Rowena Arshad's word—rights; and the question of managing transition. We come back to the point that we need to work in partnership, which is why the universities feel that it is important to work with an organisation such as Skill Scotland. We want to find out how we can best make the provisions in the 2004 act effective.

11:15

Sue Pinder: From the ASC's experience, we echo David Caldwell's comments. To use the media-training phrase, it is too early to say. We are still very much in the process of working with partners to explore what the act might mean for us. For example, it features frequently on the agenda for the principals' forum, where such issues are discussed. It is also being taken back to college level to be discussed with the local networking groups with which colleges work. We have high hopes that the legislation will enable some coherence to emerge in this area. However, I have no hard evidence to give to the committee of how it is working at the moment.

Nora Radcliffe: We can ask all the witnesses back next year.

Sue Pinder: That would be a pleasure.

The Convener: The committee is keen to hear a wee bit more about the teachability project. Has its outcome been successful or not?

David Caldwell: The general judgment is that it has been very successful. When it began, it was based at the University of Strathclyde. However, one indication of its success is that it has been rolled out to 13 institutions, which is much the larger part of the Scottish university sector. It has been going for a long time; the teachability booklet was issued in 2000.

There have been many different outputs. The project focused on creating accessible seminars and tutorials for disabled students, support for academic departments and the business of confidence building. The many specific examples include a geography-geology school that developed a virtual fieldwork trip that allowed a disabled student to participate when it would not otherwise have been feasible. Through the project, a large amount of good practice has been developed and rolled out across the sector. It is a tremendously good illustration of how the sector, with the support of its funding body, can be proactive and innovative. It shows how the sector initiated a positive action that was helpful to disabled students before a legislative requirement to do so was introduced. The sector saw the needs of these students and went ahead in engaging in a very successful project.

The Convener: This is a question for the Association of Scotland's Colleges. It appears that there is limited, if any, accommodation provision at further education level for disabled students. Why is this and are there any plans to review the situation?

Sue Pinder: There is limited accommodation for disabled students in colleges. It is a demand factor; there has not been a great deal of demand for it. When I spoke to principals whose colleges have accommodation, they assured me that it was properly adapted should disabled students wish to access it. As far as I am aware, there are no plans to review accommodation.

The Convener: We heard that there was a need for that.

At an event that the committee held in June 2005 for young disabled people, the absence of a residential college in Scotland was mentioned specifically as a barrier for some in accessing further and higher education. What are your views on whether Scotland should have a residential college?

Sue Pinder: The view of the colleges is that that is, perhaps, not necessary. Several colleges in Scotland have specific areas of expertise and the colleges would like those centres to be better developed. Although we would like the needs of disabled learners to be met in Scotland as far as is possible, we are agnostic as to whether a residential college is needed. Our view is that some resourcing of the existing centres is needed.

The Convener: We have asked many questions this morning and we are halfway through the inquiry. Are there any matters that the witnesses feel that we have missed that they should tell us about?

Rowena Arshad: It has already been mentioned that the new Scottish equalities unit will cover both colleges and universities. We are keen to receive the committee's recommendations to see how we can take that forward in both sectors.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their evidence. I will suspend the meeting for five minutes to allow for a changeover in witnesses.

11:20

Meeting suspended.

11:25

On resuming—

The Convener: I extend a warm welcome to our second panel of witnesses, who are Alison Cox from the BRITE initiative; Sally Mackintosh from the DARE Foundation; Rona Connolly from Linking Education and Disability Scotland; Yvonne Brown from learndirect Scotland; and Lesley Berry from Skill Scotland. As we did with our first panel, we will go straight to questions.

Marlyn Glen: I will start with a broad question about careers advice. The committee has heard in evidence that the careers advice that is provided to young disabled people varies greatly throughout the country. People have told us that they want a person-centred service that matches their career choices, interests and aspirations. How can that be achieved?

Sally Mackintosh (DARE Foundation): One major issue that is raised in the workshops that we hold throughout the country for the Executive as part of the transition into supportive employment and education—TISEE—project is the lack of careers advisers who specialise in disability and the needs of disabled young people. Another issue is the level of careers input that advisers can give in a short timeframe. Disabled people need much longer input and they need to build up a better rapport. A quick half-hour discussion every now and then is not adequate for disabled young people to make informed choices.

Rona Connolly (Linking Education and Disability Scotland): Lead Scotland supports disabled adults. Careers advice is provided in schools but, for disabled adults, the advice is patchy and inconsistent, which means that people might not receive the targeted advice that they need, when they need it. Many of the people whom we support do not desire, and do not see themselves as being in need of, careers advice and so are not necessarily receptive to the package. Therefore, one issue may be marketing of the available advice. Also, flexibility in service delivery could be improved, particularly in rural areas where the opportunity to have a face-to-face interview is often restricted.

Lesley Berry (Skill Scotland): Skill Scotland suggests that all careers advisers should have disability equality training and more specialist knowledge, such as knowledge of students' rights under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. They should also have information on how benefits might be affected by studying and on Government schemes such as access to work. Some advisers at universities and colleges do not have that knowledge, but it is desirable for all careers advisers to have that knowledge so that students do not have to go to specialist careers advisers. The key point is that training on such matters should not be a one-off event; it should be on-going and built into continuing professional development.

Yvonne Brown (learndirect Scotland): Rona Connolly mentioned an important point about rural outreach and the ability to reach people who are less physically accessible because of geographical constraints. As members will be aware, learndirect Scotland brands and quality assures a network of learning centres, which we neither own nor have authority over, although we have an excellent working relationship with them. There is a footprint that covers all Scotland, including the Highlands and Islands—even the remote islands—that information givers could capitalise on better. The centres might not always have the appropriate specialism, but they are absolutely required to be able to signpost individuals to those specialisms. That network of 499 centres may be an untapped opportunity for delivery where people are and where they need it.

11:30

Alison Cox (BRITE Initiative): Lesley Berry's suggestion—that every careers officer should have specialist training—is valuable. I believe I was the first person in a further education college to appoint a careers officer who had specialist knowledge. That was linked to the edstart programme, which members may know about, the principle behind which was underpinned by the

strapline, "You can't get employment if you haven't had work experience and you can't get experience of work if you haven't had a job." We realised that it was not possible to be successful in providing support into work through careers guidance, job coaching and so on if one did not have a careers adviser who had the right knowledge on tap.

The employment of the individual in question continued in the same context for a five-year period, but it came to an end when the view was adopted that everyone in careers guidance's role should be generic and there should be no specialists. That is my understanding of the situation, but I would be grateful if you would check that with Careers Scotland. That need not be a bad thing if all the generic advisers are equipped with the skills that enable them to identify a broad range of needs and to provide appropriate guidance to fit those needs. I am talking about the provision of guidance not just on what it means to be a truck driver, a vet or a construction engineer, but on what it means to be a vet without sight or a construction engineer who has an amputation. Those are extreme examples, but it is important to integrate expertise in empowering people who have additional needs with expertise in understanding what jobs entail. I endorse the suggestion that, as part of their core initial training, every careers officer should acquire disability awareness.

Marlyn Glen: The submissions from Skill Scotland, the DARE Foundation and Lead Scotland mention that there are low expectations of what disabled students can achieve. How can and how do your organisations work to increase expectations in respect of disabled students?

Rona Connolly: We work in a heavily person-centred way. Anyone who is in the business of providing adult learning support will recognise that, as people achieve and progress at a pace and in a place that suit them, their confidence rises and they can readily achieve things that they might not previously have realised they could achieve. Once they have the taste for that, and they have the appropriate level of support to make progress, they can do so quite swiftly. However, a great deal of broader and more far-reaching work needs to be done. We need to start raising expectations earlier by having a much broader education and development programme that starts in schools and which embeds a social model of disability.

There are also individuals who acquire disabilities, which strikes a blow to their confidence. They need to be able to access support at a pace and in a place that suit them so that the options that they are capable of pursuing can be adequately explained to them. Such work is underresourced in the community. It is right that there is emphasis on how to raise expectations in schools and how to support people to progress into adult learning and further learning, but little thinking is done on how that can be done in the community for people who experience changes in lifestyle and of whom expectations—including their own—may be lower.

I think that the Disability Rights Commission suggested that a general awareness campaign is needed. A campaign to raise public awareness of disability issues and of rights under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 would go some way towards complementing the more developmental programme that has been suggested.

Lesley Berry: Skill Scotland produces a range of publications specifically for disabled students, such as "Into Nursing and Midwifery", "Into Medicine" and "Into Law". As well as giving information, support and ideas on how to get into specific careers, they include case studies and role models of successful disabled graduates. We think that that work could be extended; for example, DVDs including case studies and role models from among disabled graduates could be made for careers services.

Alison Cox: All my experience of teaching has been in the college sector. I have worked in that sector for 23 years and I can honestly say that, in all those years, my experience has not been that every member of staff has low expectations of their students. In my current role, I work with all the colleges and, in general, there is a pervasive can-do attitude among staff in respect of their expectations of their students.

However, we must recognise that, by the time people arrive at college, they might have a well-developed tendency to have low expectations of themselves, perhaps because of their experiences before college. We should turn our attention to how to encourage people who have had their expectations knocked out of them in early life, perhaps because of the low expectations of their parents or schools, or because they do not fit the system comfortably. Such people might have developed a reputation that is not deserved. We need to consider how we can turn around the lack of success that comes when other people have low expectations and people have low expectations of themselves. We need to exploit what I genuinely believe is the can-do attitude in colleges.

We want to challenge our students. We want them to be stretched, inspired and motivated, but sometimes we are working with a rather fragile client group that has not tasted success often. We need to be conscious of that and we need to make sure that it is recognised by college staff. If a college has a can-do attitude for its students but it discovers that its students do not share that attitude, it must not give up. We must find ways to

tease out higher expectations and to capitalise on them.

Sally Mackintosh: I whole-heartedly endorse that. The TISEE workshop programme and the research that we have been doing are focused on younger people in schools—those who are aged 14 to 19. The crucial elements of preparation begin at an early age. We work with schools throughout Scotland and we find that young people's expectation levels are very much dependent on individuals within schools. Some schools are pro-active in promoting inclusion, developing expectation and expecting young people to achieve. At the other extreme, some schools have the attitude that the students will never work, that there is no need for them to achieve things because they will never do anything and that they are vulnerable and need protection. In those schools, staff think that the pupils will not survive in the outside world without help, so they do not worry about work experience. We need early preparation for school staff and parents and we need to involve the young people themselves. That is crucial if they are to succeed when they go to college because attitudes are often ingrained by the time they get there.

Marlyn Glen: Written evidence from the DARE Foundation and Skill Scotland suggests that each local authority should have an officer or key worker with specific responsibility for providing disabled people with careers advice and transition support. Does the panel agree with that suggestion?

Alison Cox: That was the intention of the Beattie inclusiveness funding—that is, the £20.6 million that was allocated in 2001 as a result of the Beattie committee's report, with which the committee will be familiar. One of the report's key findings was the need for co-ordinated services and for support, guidance and advice to be available regardless of postcode. That report said that, no matter where a person lives, they are entitled to the same good-quality service. Of course, a significant chunk of that money—£15.1 million—went to Careers Scotland to enable it to develop inclusiveness workers. I agree in principle that people should be able to access support regardless of the local authority area they reside in, but we should learn from what has already been achieved with that funding. We should consider areas in which initiatives have worked, ask why they have worked and learn lessons before we recommend a continuation or extension of the facility.

I think that we will find—my observation of the reporting so far certainly suggests this—that in some areas things have worked well but in others there continue to be barriers to ensuring that a named person, a key worker or an inclusiveness worker is available for the right people at the right time. Equally, if we take the argument to its conclusion, one is likely to need access and entitlement to that person over a considerable time. The projects that were initially funded under the Beattie recommendations were for people between the ages of 16 and 24, so we need to consider how services can be made available to people of all ages and wherever they are needed. We must learn from what has been achieved through those projects.

Yvonne Brown: I agree. I noticed an advertisement in the papers on Friday for two posts in the Scottish Further Education Unit that focused on disability issues. If we are looking to another source of specialist expertise, we need to beware and ensure that access is simple and that we do not end up confusing and cluttering the landscape with a proliferation of specialisms from different areas. Such specialisms are okay so long as delivery is lined up, the flow of communication and information to the individual beneficiary is clean, decisions are easy to make and people know where to go without any confusion. They should not have to ask whether they should go to one thing because they might be interested in it, or whether they should talk to somebody else.

We need consistency and what would be almost a national service level agreement. I know that those are horrible words, but everyone—no matter where they are—has a right to consistency, no matter who the supplier is. We have the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and many contextual guides about how we should implement it, but more is needed. We need to pool everybody's good will. I work with most of the agencies that are represented around the table and I know how they feel about clients. Learndirect Scotland is very much about the pledge to learners and learner-centred provision. That is our core tool for engagement, and I know that other agencies take a similar approach.

It is a question of lining things up and making services easy for individuals to navigate. If people already experience barriers to access, we do not want to introduce another barrier by coming up with different sources of support all over the place. We need to line things up and make everything consistent and cohesive across the country and across the agencies that provide services.

Lesley Berry: As well as a specialist careers adviser in each area, there should be specialist careers assistants so that we can avoid a backlog. Those people could be champions of specialist careers advice and could feed that down the system, which would tie in with the aim of ensuring that all careers staff have basic disability equality training. They should also have a strategic planning role and should not just handle casework.

I point out that there might be a fear of students being pigeonholed and directed straight to the specialist advisers—all students should be able to go to mainstream careers advisers, which is why disability equality training is so important.

Marlyn Glen: It is always interesting to explore the tension between specialism and mainstreaming. My next question is about mainstreaming. Do you feel that further and higher education providers are currently working towards mainstreaming of equality in further and higher education provision? Have you seen evidence of that?

Rona Connolly: There is evidence, but there is still a long way to go. It would be helpful if statistics for different institutions could be brought into line, so that the issue could be put under the spotlight and trends monitored more consistently. It would be good to ensure consistency so that we count heads, rather than course enrolments; there is obviously a clear distinction between the two.

11:45

The other area that I want to highlight in terms of mainstreaming is not solely an issue for colleges or even universities, but applies also to the institutions that design courses. I refer to the need for courses to be designed with inclusion and accessibility built in. We have a lot of evidence, some of it on current practice, that when courses are being designed, accessibility issues are considered belatedly and are addressed subsequent to the main design process, with materials being bolted on at the end. That practice is unacceptable in the 21st century.

Alison Cox: I would caution against the one-size-fits-all approach, which is sometimes propounded as mainstreaming. My view of mainstreaming is that it means different things to different people. We also have to recognise that giving everyone access to the same course does not give every one of them access to the same positive learning experience.

BRITE is working with all the colleges to encourage them to examine mainstreaming of equality from two different directions: access—which I will say a little about, if I am permitted to do so—and the curriculum. We believe that applicants for courses should always be considered on the basis of aptitude, interests and ability; they should never be rejected on the ground of their having a disability. It is only fair to say that most colleges already share that notion. Of course, the principle is now strengthened in legislation.

When considering access, the emphasis should be on the need to ensure that recruitment application processes and policies always focus on the student's interests, aptitudes and capabilities. For any learning experience to be successful, we need to hang on to the notion that a good fit needs to be made between the abilities, interests and capabilities of the individual and the demands and mode of delivery of the course.

Historically, excuses may have been made on the basis that a course was inaccessible. However, few arguments can be put forward to say that a course is inherently inaccessible. Indeed, if that were the case, it would be as a result of something that was wrong with the course and not with the applicant. Again, much of our work with colleges and so on is about ensuring that courses are not inherently accessible and that students can be enrolled on courses on the basis of what they are interested in doing.

I listened to the earlier evidence, which included a response that is key to my next point. It is really important that schools, colleges, universities and training providers ensure that their curricula are equitable by design. I have a couple of examples for the committee. Earlier, the SQA representative talked about the dearth of appropriately qualified specialists who can design accessible websites. Perhaps I am oversimplifying the solution, but the answer seems to be obvious: the core curriculum of all web design and multimedia technology courses should include the design of accessible websites. Indeed, the curriculum should include the implications for many people—students and potential customers alike—of inaccessible website design. My second example is landscape design courses. The core curricula for such courses should be scrutinised to see whether subjects such as sensory planting, non-slip surfaces or use of appropriate path gradients are included.

If a college or other learning provider can give a resounding "Yes" in answer to the questions whether access to courses is considered on the basis of aptitude and ability, and whether they not only talk all the time in their curriculum about equality but develop diversity and equality skills in all its learners, it is likely that we will have achieved meaningful rather than tokenistic mainstreaming.

Marlyn Glen: That is very helpful.

Sally Mackintosh: Our experience with young people leads us to say that it is not accessibility or even getting to college that causes young people to fail or not complete courses, but a lack of preparation. I refer to the academic and physical requirements of a course and how appropriate it is for the young person. We know of young people who do well at college only to stumble at a hurdle, simply because the appropriate provision was neither thought through in advance nor were they aware of the full course requirements, which has led to their failing or moving on to something that

they do not really want to do because it was the next-best option. Taking time to prepare young people to go to college or taking them to a summer school for a few days to find out what the demands of a course are and how it fits in with their career planning would be hugely valuable.

Nora Radcliffe: We heard a great deal of evidence about students arriving at college or university to find that their support package was not in place. It is about the practicalities of college life—adaptive technology, having course materials prepared in alternative formats ready for use, and physical adaptations. What more can be done to ensure that what is on paper happens in practice and that an individual's support requirements are in place prior to their beginning a course?

Sally Mackintosh: We suggested that there should be a transition co-ordinator who would be not just an individual specialist who works with young people but could also co-ordinate a transition team to work with schools. We found through working in schools that transition planning is very haphazard; it is often left to the last minute and is done as a last resort. Often, young people are not consulted and are not kept involved in the process throughout; they often do not know who will be at the various meetings. Perhaps appropriate professionals are not brought in at the right time and appropriate supports that might be required in college or at higher education institutions are not applied for in time. Nobody asks the young person what supports they will need. Decisions are taken for them, so incorrect supports can be put be in place. The structure of early planning is vital, as is the involvement of young people to ensure that supports are applied for in time and are correctly designed for the individual who needs them.

Rona Connolly: In our experience, there is inconsistency between colleges. Early planning can work, but, equally, as the committee has found from evidence, people arrive at college to find that support is inadequate. "Partnership Matters" goes some way towards encouraging partnership working and enabling people to think about the mechanisms by which support packages can be considered earlier. It would be helpful if there was a way of enforcing the message in "Partnership Matters" and of ensuring that agencies work more closely together.

I also wondered whether a review of the support packages system could be undertaken, although I am not entirely sure whether it would be done by SFHEFC or Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. There should be means for assessing and reviewing different practices, for exploring best practice and for allowing institutions to develop better practices to ensure that individuals are not disadvantaged when they start courses. On occasion, Lead Scotland is brought in to offer pragmatic support to individuals who would not otherwise be able to start or maintain a course, even though they had been enrolled. Support that has been assessed and which is not disputed has to be in place when students need it.

I urge the committee to look at the need for support for learners in the community who do not necessarily make the transition to college straight from school. We should look at what is available in the community to provide partnership working and infrastructure to allow people to aspire to college as a progression pathway. From the different aspects of support with learning and support with care, Lead Scotland worked with Enable Scotland to support individuals. We have also worked with colleges to put in place what has been needed. That enabled us to support a great deal of pre-access provision, which has meant that course work has been addressed and that learning supports have been put in place ready for the start of college.

Nora Radcliffe: It seems to be important to have support provision ready in time for the start of a course. Is underdeclaration a big issue? Have you found that students occasionally do not feel confident enough to declare that they have special needs?

Rona Connolly: I think that there is underdeclaration. However, preparatory support was still needed in the cases that we addressed, even though everyone in the college was rooting for the students. There will be more problem areas, or areas to be addressed, in colleges that have a more rigorous or bureaucratic process, or in which communication breaks down, for example. Therefore, even colleges that are well aware of the support that is needed must ensure that the various agencies involved in providing that support—including, perhaps, care managers—address where the learning will take place and what care and other practical provisions must be put in place in the college. They must also make the tutor aware that information may need be provided in a different format and so on. All those aspects must be closely co-ordinated.

The issue is continuity of support, and an agency such as ours can assist an individual to deal with all the different people who need to be in the know.

Nora Radcliffe: Yes—to get all the ducks lined up.

Alison Cox: On Nora Radcliffe's question on whether underdeclaration is an issue, I think that it has been, but it is pleasing to report that it is becoming less so. We encourage disclosure, but I think that we all recognise that people disclose their difficulties or needs only if they feel that there

is a prospect of those needs being met. Historically, in many different areas of education, keeping one's difficulties to oneself has not been publicly promoted but it has been commonly adopted.

There must be an incentive to disclose and I think that that comes from colleges demonstrably indicating a welcome to all students, not just through the individual champions, who are undoubtedly critical, but in the way in which colleges are promoted through prospectuses, websites, opportunities fairs, links with the community and partnerships with schools. The report "Partnership Matters" has encouraged significant activity that has brought different stakeholders together to try to understand the benefits of early disclosure.

The only other point that I want to make about the process is that it cannot start on the day that the course starts. As the manager of an agency that often plays a bail-out role when colleges find that a disabled student has just appeared, I am still surprised by the number of potential students who do not understand that, however willing a system or service is, that is not a quick fix. Proper preparation requires advance planning, and we must ensure that that is communicated widely so that the process to provide the scaffold that will enable the student to succeed does not start only on the day on which the student comes through the door saying, "You'll be pleased to know I've signed up for course A or course B."

Lesley Berry: During the earlier session, someone mentioned the idea of students being encouraged to come early to a college or a university. That would perhaps make them more comfortable about disclosing their disability and give them the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the environment, the equipment and the social life. However, that is expensive and we suggest either that that extra time could be funded through the DSA or that the university or college should pay for it.

We have also heard of problems involving students who move from one local authority area to another to go to college or university and who find it difficult to get their care package in place. That happens because of the logistics involved in moving to a different area. We suggest that there should be one local authority key worker in each area whom the student could contact to arrange their care package in the new area.

Sally Mackintosh: I support what Lesley Berry has just said and have something to add. We have found that the fall-down of many students who do not apply for the correct support in time happens because of the changeover from child to adult services and a lack of information for the students and their families about how to access the different types of support that are available from the different agencies. Many families just assume that the same support will follow their child when they leave school and go on to FE, but that is not the case. Many of the problems could be easily ironed out and prevented if schools provided better communication and information to families well in advance, but that does not happen much.

12:00

The Convener: The Committee heard at its consultation events about pretendy courses with no meaningful outcomes or qualifications. Written evidence from the DARE Foundation states:

"colleges are at risk of becoming new day centres, accommodating people who are unlikely to achieve academically."

The committee recognises that such courses may be appropriate in certain circumstances. However, what can your organisations do to ensure that students have sufficient choice in the courses that they do?

Rona Connolly: Lead Scotland is about supporting people to find creative solutions. However, even we have difficulties in creating options, because they do not exist in every instance. For example, an individual may not yet be able to access what they would like to study within mainstream provision but the pathway courses would not help them to develop at a higher level of attainment. The best that we can do in such circumstances is to look for a provider who has what that person needs. We can then put in place the support that allows them to acquire the skills that ultimately allow access to mainstream education as an end goal, if you like. It is evident that the need is there, but the choices and different levels of courses that result in the more inclusive programme of options for an individual must be on offer. That is why we have pathway courses. We feel there is a need for pre-access support in mainstream provision. There must be more emphasis on that role, which colleges, frankly, cannot perform because they are funded to support people who are enrolled in their courses. What are needed are the steps—the building blocks—that enable people to acquire the skills and develop the competencies that allow them to access mainstream education, if that is their desire. There are mainstream courses; the issue is ensuring that the curriculum is inclusive and appropriate, as someone said earlier.

A further point to make about what you described as pretendy courses is that Enable and Lead Scotland have worked together on a small pilot project that has given sufficient evidence for us to argue that we do not view the group 18 courses that are run and funded through Scottish colleges as appropriate for the 21st century. In our

view, while the emphasis should be on appropriate options, there should not be segregation of provision. The likelihood is that people who reach the end of the process have nothing left and have to go around the revolving door and back in again.

Yvonne Brown: The Scottish Executive funds learndirect Scotland to manage the national learning opportunities database, which itemises 100,000 courses that are available in Scotland. Recently, I did a search on the database for flags that indicated whether a course was specifically targeted at individuals with disability or offered training in dealing with individuals with disability. I came up with fewer than 100 courses. Our organisation does not have the power to tell course providers to give that information. However, the database provides an excellent opportunity to make the information more available and to allow people to consider how they might progress. In the main, specialist agencies populate the database with that information. They are much more likely to put up information on courses that particularly target individuals with special needs. When we communicate with the branded learning centres that represent FE and HE, there may be a role for us in ensuring that the information is populated in a way that makes the search easier for the specialist who is supporting the individual.

Alison Cox: I would like to make a point about Yvonne Brown's comment that there are relatively few courses on the national learning opportunities database that are designed specifically for people with learning difficulties or special needs—I say, "Hooray," to that.

It seems to me that we should not design courses that are targeted specifically at people with disabilities. I can understand why special programmes have attracted a less favourable press and why organisations such as Lead Scotland are not sympathetic to group 18 programmes: it tends to be because those programmes have been developed around a diagnosis rather than around a subject interest or a range of support needs.

Although I am not a campaigner for the continuation of special programmes per se, I highlight the fact that there are some good examples of programmes that are customised to suit the needs of the learner. They carry group 18 funding—group 18 is a funding mechanism, not a course. We must realise that a significant proportion of the funding that colleges receive is related to outputs—that is, retention and success. In an average college, success is measured by the number of vocational qualifications. That gives rise to a conflict, which we all need to work hard to resolve. If a college is measured by its success in getting students to achieve in vocational subject areas but, at the same time, is enjoying—I mean that word—a massive increase in interest from people who present with high-tariff or complex needs, we must collectively do something, because we cannot have it both ways. Colleges cannot be funded on the basis of vocational outcomes only and then be criticised for not offering enough pretendy courses—or offering too many, depending on who the commentator is.

In reality, whenever any of us embarks on a learning opportunity, we want it to be of interest. I do not open a university prospectus thinking, "I want a course for left-handed people", although I am left handed and need certain accommodations for that in certain contexts—chequebooks for a start. I do not look for a course for a tall, middle-aged woman who is left handed; I look for a course in a subject in which I am interested. We can all work to ensure that the match is with the course that interests the individual, because people with disabilities are not defined by their diagnoses. Special programmes that have defined people by their diagnoses are the least popular, and a move away from that is welcome.

Lesley Berry: On the question of pretendy courses, one of the key issues is that better quality control is needed in curriculum planning. Work needs to be done to ensure clear learning outcomes and elements of progression for each course. The details of the curriculum and the learning outcomes should be available to students to help them to make better-informed choices.

The Convener: The committee has received written evidence that there should be more vocational courses—perhaps developed with supported employment providers—that assist people in gaining employment skills. What are the witnesses' thoughts on that suggestion? Alison Cox has already spoken about the idea of people gaining experience through a work placement. It is difficult for somebody to move into work unless they have experience.

Alison Cox: Yes, it is. The edstart programme recognised the axiomatic need for an applicant to be able to demonstrate that they have experience in a setting to make themselves attractive to an employer. We heard from the previous panel of witnesses examples of work experience being integrated into many programmes. I certainly concur with Sue Pinder's suggestion that it can be extremely difficult for someone with a disability to sell themselves in a half-hour interview to an employer who knows about the DDA but is terrified that they will not be able to provide the job supports that the person would need.

One of the positive things about work experience and work placements is that they remove the terror factor in two ways. First, they enable the individual to test and hone their skills and to develop their social interaction in the work

context. We all know that work is about much more than just doing a job; it is also about the dynamics between us and our peers and colleagues and the social engagement that we have with them. There is an opportunity to test that and to develop appropriate behaviour as an employee.

Equally, placements take out the terror factor for the employer, who can be reassured by the college, by the agency that provides support or by the employment services that many things can be done to overcome the hurdles. The risk for the employer is reduced because the opportunity has been tested. All vocational programmes should have a work experience element and people with a disability should not be precluded from that element on the ground that their disability makes it difficult to organise. I would have no sympathy for such a suggestion.

Sally Mackintosh: I agree with that totally. Vocational courses should concentrate on the development of core working skills and core employability skills for young people and not simply on a particular vocational skill. Many people who go through school and college still cannot find a job because they do not possess the core employability skills, such as teamworking and social skills. There should be much more focus on those skills than there is at present. Many of the young people whom we are discussing are socially isolated and find it extremely difficult to gain those skills but, without them, they cannot progress into meaningful employment.

The Convener: In written evidence to the committee, a lack of flexibility in certain courses was highlighted as a problem. Are courses flexible enough and, if not, what more can further and higher education providers do to adjust their courses to be more flexible?

Rona Connolly: Flexibility is key. The issue takes us back to the issues of working in partnership and considering more creative ways of working. Most of the solutions and possibilities are not rocket science; they are simple and straightforward, but we need the volition to address the issues with a driving principle of inclusion and flexibility. The perception may exist that the work would cost a significant amount of money or that services must be appropriate for the most intensive support need that can be identified before they can be offered. We need to turn that on its head and look for more straightforward ways in which to build in inclusion as a driver in the institutions that provide learning experiences.

John Swinburne: Do further and higher education providers make the best use of their funding to support disabled people? What more could they do to target resources appropriately in that regard?

Alison Cox: Many examples exist of the good use of funds in further and higher education, some of which were captured in written evidence to the committee. The committee has observed that practice in some of its visits. However, there is a continuing tension between the targeting of resources—funding in another guise—at individuals, to enable them to compensate for barriers in the system, and at institutions, to enable them to be inclusive by design. That is one factor that has come to the fore in the work of the disabled students stakeholder group, which was referred to earlier. I refer the committee to that group's findings and to its developmental activities. All the members of that group have an ambition of achieving clarity about how much should go as core funding to institutions, to encourage inclusiveness by design, and how much should continue to be targeted at or available to individuals, to enable them to carve out their learning path. We have not yet resolved that tension.

Contradictions sometimes arise in funding. I cite the disability premium in funding for higher education, which Rowena Arshad mentioned. The premium is distributed to universities formulaically, on the basis of data that are gathered about the number of students in each institution who claim disabled student allowance. I suggest that there is a contradiction in that. Disabled students allowance is predicated on the idea that individuals need it because barriers exist in the institution that would otherwise prevent them from gaining equal access. It does not take too much extrapolation from that to realise that the institutions that are inherently good at accommodating the widest range of needs are likely to have the smallest number of students who need recourse to DSA. However, the system rewards the institutions that have the most applicants for DSA.

I do not have an easy answer to the problem. The Scottish funding council needs a simple and sustainable mechanism for distributing a limited pot of funds, but I have a responsibility to alert you to the tension. There are other, similar tensions.

12:15

The Convener: We are aware of the tensions. In particular, DSA funding is available to students in higher education, but students in further education colleges, which might be more appropriate and closer to them, do not have access to that money. How can we change that?

Alison Cox: It is slightly more insidious even than that. Some students in further education colleges are eligible to apply for disabled students allowance. They are students who are on higher national certificate courses and above. Those

courses are defined as higher education even though they are delivered by the further education system. As someone who has worn a number of hats during many years of working in education in Scotland, I can see the issue from the colleges' perspective. I managed a college service for a decade and students with disabilities bemoaned the lack of an individual allowance to enable them to purchase equipment and so on, but we have to be careful not to rush into the notion that individual allowances are always the solution. In an ideal situation, if a college is fully inclusive and it makes available equipment, adaptive technology and assistive technology, it is unlikely that the needs that existed previously would be appropriately met by DSA.

Having said that, there are challenging issues for colleges in the absence of DSA. Non-advanced students do not get individual allowances. That includes students who are studying for national certificates, voluntary qualifications, access 1, 2 or 3, intermediate 1 and 2 and highers. Those students, their parents and their significant others face problems with funding for full-time British Sign Language interpreters, providers of intimate personal care, transport and so on. Those things allow students to go to college but non-advanced students at further education colleges do not get funding for them. In the higher education sector DSA addresses those needs effectively through the non-medical personal help allowance.

If there is a gap, I suggest that it is around the areas that I mentioned. We need to bring to the table the partners who can resolve the problem. "Partnership Matters" has opened up dialogue between social work, health, education and training providers, but there is still no shared view about who is responsible for each component. As a spokesperson for the learner, my worry is that, whenever there is no agreement, clarity or cohesion, the victim is the individual. They face a complex landscape and they often identify gaps in provision.

Lesley Berry: I agree with what Alison Cox said about students who attend further education colleges. Individual funding is not always an option and sometimes it is more appropriate for the college to provide funding, but an equivalent to DSA funding would be a good option for students whose needs cannot be fully met by the college. There is also a slight discrepancy between the two systems, in that students who are on higher education courses at university are entitled to DSA whereas students at further education colleges are only eligible to apply for it. There should be stronger support for students in colleges.

John Swinburne: The DARE Foundation's written evidence says that the system of funding for special courses promotes "anti-inclusion". What are the panel's views on that comment, and what can be done to solve the problem?

Rona Connolly: For reasons that we have already given, Lead has declared itself an advocate of increasing choice by not ghettoising and by not continuing with the group 18 programme. The objective should be a properly resourced mainstream curriculum that offers choice and progression routes and is supported by principles of inclusion. Support should be tailored to the needs of the learner.

We urge the committee to consider what funds are available to support learning in the community—that is, pre-institution. We have to accommodate any change to the present curriculum so that people with complex needs can be supported. College can be a potential exit route if that is what people want.

Alison Cox: There is a place for programmes that are customised to meet high and complex needs; a special programme is not wrong or bad per se. However, I agree whole-heartedly with Rona Connolly: if a programme is customised for individuals with complex needs, it must be based on their interests, aptitudes and aspirations, and it must not cluster people because of their diagnoses.

Clustering people with, for example, acquired brain injury or social, emotional and behavioural problems gives special programmes a deservedly bad press, because it has led to stigma and segregation. But let us not throw out special programmes wholesale because of that experience; let us use our energies to ensure that, when customised programming continues, it continues because people have chosen to opt into it and not because they are cornered and have no other choice.

Lesley Berry: The statement from DARE refers to the fact that students on special courses get a weighting of 1.8, whereas students who have additional support needs but are in a mainstream class get a weighting of only 1.5. A solution might be to make the weightings the same so that colleges do not have a perverse financial incentive to encourage students to go on special courses.

Alison Cox: The 1.5 weighting for extended learning support is applied on top of the vocational course weighting, so there is no perverse incentive to opt for the special dominant programme group 18. The funding for a weighting of 1.8 is less favourable than the funding for a weighting of 1.5 that is added on to the vocational weighting. Accountancy, for instance, has a vocational weighting of just under 1, so that would be added to the 1.5 for extended learning support to get a weighting of nearer 2.5. It is important to make that point so that we are accurate.

Lesley Berry: I will come back on that point. I was thinking of the comparison for two non-vocational courses, in which case there might be slightly more funding for the special course.

John Swinburne: The committee notes the two different funding systems in further and higher education. What recommendations would your organisations make to simplify and improve the system of funding to students?

Rona Connolly: Alison Cox covered this ground eloquently earlier. People attending college face all sorts of barriers, but I am no expert on the funding mechanisms so I would be happier for the committee to deliberate on that complex area.

A dialogue has begun since the publication of "Partnership Matters". Before that, momentum had been building behind the scenes, and that needs to continue. We have to encourage the people who are responsible for personal care, health care and so on to take responsibility and to clarify where responsibility actually lies. The committee might be able to add some force to the views that were expressed at the time of the working group on "Partnership Matters".

John Swinburne: The committee has heard that students may have difficulty in accessing information about the type of support that is available, the courses that are available, the funding, and the different aspects of student life. What can your organisations do to facilitate access to such information in accessible formats?

Yvonne Brown: That is a key area for us. The committee will be aware that we are speaking to funding for learners about developing the national learning opportunities database to include criteria on the things that you referred to, including sources of funding. The database is an obvious way of providing such information. I referred earlier to the number of courses that are described as offering specific support. If the national learning opportunities database could signpost individuals in the direction of further information on funding, that would be a useful development.

Adding such information would not be an intimidating prospect. The national learning opportunities database is being revamped and improved to accommodate, for example, the Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels. What I described could be addressed in the development of the NLOD, alongside the funding for learners information.

Alison Cox: The underpinning activity of the BRITE initiative is to increase the capacity of all colleges in Scotland to be inclusive. We work strenuously through our staff development programme and our seminars, which are open to all college staff, to raise awareness of the factors that facilitate inclusiveness and, indeed, the barriers that inhibit learning. We do that in a wide range of ways, involving demonstration and application, to show staff how they can ensure that their colleges are more inclusive.

Everyone who reaches stage 4 of the BRITE accredited programme has to go through an arduous practical exercise—they would tell you that it is arduous, but I think that it is character forming—in which they undertake a rigorous organisational analysis of the college in which they work to ascertain how inclusive it is. With the full knowledge of their senior management team, peers and colleagues, they work on unearthing barriers to inclusion. It is inspiring that they often come back with ideas and solutions. As a national initiative, our role is to encourage them to take the ideas and solutions back to their organisations and to ensure that what they have uncovered through their analysis informs how they develop policy and practice.

Rona Connolly: Lead Scotland works with individuals to support them to gain the information that they need. We ensure that the information is accessible and that people can interpret it and apply it to identifying their own learning goals and any barriers that might exist, so that they end up with a tailored package of support that is appropriate to their needs. Clearly, that is very much an individual response.

We also work with learning providers as advocates of individuals. We take to learning providers the lessons that we have learned from our experience to drive forward the move to more inclusive provision. However, there is a limit to what any single organisation can do. The need is perhaps to consider the voluntary sector, which plays a role in adult learning, as a strong sector that is capable of working effectively in partnership with learning providers. Perhaps we should value that sector more highly and resource it. In the context of the lifelong learning strategy, links need to be made to allow the availability and provision of information to be monitored so that account can be taken of the support of the voluntary agencies.

Lesley Berry: There is a lot of good information out there for students, but perhaps it is not very joined up. Many students find it difficult to have to go to one person for information on funding, to somebody else for information on benefits and somewhere else for information on the social side of studying. Perhaps if all that information was contained in one place—in the college or university prospectus, for example—it would be easier for students to access what they need.

Yvonne Brown: I want to clarify my earlier comment on the national learning opportunities database. The database is front ended by the contact centre and the individuals there are constantly trained and retrained to accommodate

calls or requests for information from any member of the public, regardless of disability or whatever.

12:30

Sally Mackintosh: The DARE Foundation works with young people to improve information for them. We have found through our workshops that young people and their families do not know what they do not know; the information is often not joined up and is not given out in appropriate formats. Our workshops deliver the information to people in different ways by getting them to work together with the providers and empowering them to know where to go, how to ask for information and how to find things out. Providing written information or a website is not always enough, because some people need to have things explained to them on a one-to-one basis; they need somebody to take them through where they should go and what they should do. Different methods of delivery, especially verbal explanation, are vital.

Marlyn Glen: I asked the previous panel of witnesses about combating negative attitudes towards disabled people in education. Those who participated in our consultation events said that staff training was a way of combating such attitudes. The previous panel agreed, although the witnesses contested the fact that negative attitudes exist. Do you agree that training works? Are there any other ways of combating negative attitudes?

Yvonne Brown: We have introduced to the branded learning centre network a series of online programmes for personal development that cover matters such as the legislation on disability discrimination. Most important, one of those programmes focuses purely on attitudes towards disability and difference. The staff deal with the general public daily, but they have different levels of capacity to do so and expertise in doing so. We have ensured that the staff of every branded centre have access to that learning and they are constantly being reminded that they must carry out the learning on attitude.

We created the materials in collaboration with the DARE Foundation, which provided some of the subject expertise for that, because we are not providers of solutions. Those materials are freely available not only to the staff of the branded centres, but to any member of the general public who goes into a branded centre for any reason.

Alison Cox: Training is crucial. Staff development underpins the quality of education across the board because the most important resource that any education provider has is the people who deliver the education. The BRITE initiative has a role to play in that, as staff development is our primary raison d'être.

The previous panel said that negative attitudes are born out of lack of awareness rather than out of prejudice, and I genuinely believe that. I do not think that there is a lot of prejudicial behaviour, but there is a lot of apparent reluctance or hesitation in engagement because people are fearful of saying or doing the wrong thing or of exposing their own inadequacies in dealing with someone who has Asperger's syndrome or is hearing impaired. Staff development is the key to overcoming that, because aspirations of inclusiveness become a reality when staff are confident and competent.

Most colleges now have induction programmes that cover disability awareness and equality awareness. That is entirely appropriate, but we need to ensure that we maximise the opportunity that has arisen through the occupational standards review of teaching in tertiary education. A lot of really useful work has come out of that review and blueprints for creating inclusive learning environments have been developed. If the committee is interested in those and does not have access to them, I would be happy to share them.

On the BRITE website, we post information about all our resources. We do that for anybody, not just for people who are associated with BRITE. We have interactive multidisciplinary resources that show in practical, accessible, brief, simple but powerful ways how staff can ensure that their teaching is inclusive. Sometimes it is easier for someone to admit their limitations when they are at their own computer in the privacy of their own office than it is for them to admit in public, in a college in which they might have worked for years, that they do not know how to teach a particular student. The information that we offer has to be accessible and pertinent.

Rona Connolly: I agree with Alison Cox that staff development and training are vital. However, we have created tension by tasking colleges with running as economically viable businesses. Legislation can cause institutions to assess risk—that is laudable—but it may tip the balance slightly towards risk management, as happened with the DDA. It is hard for tutors to seek creative solutions to support people if directives from above tell them that their solutions will require rigorous processes to be put in place.

Lesley Berry: Staff training is important, but so is reaching out to other people such as non-teaching staff and students. Disability awareness should start at school, so that we can combat negative attitudes early.

Disability equality schemes will start in December this year, and involving disabled people will be a requirement. That involvement is important but it must not be tokenistic. Disabled people's comments must be taken on board, and they could be involved in the training of staff.

Sally Mackintosh: Over a period of months in each area, our workshop programmes have involved 50 per cent young disabled people and 50 per cent providers from a range of organisations. At the end of those workshops, the young people's change in attitude towards one another, and the providers' change in attitude in understanding the needs of the young disabled people, are dramatic. I agree that we must involve disabled people in the whole ethos, and not just in a tokenistic way.

Nora Radcliffe: Rona Connolly mentioned the DDA and its possibly inhibiting effects. However, we have heard that many students are not aware of their rights under the DDA. How can your organisations ensure that students are aware of their legal rights?

Rona Connolly: When people come to us we can make them aware of their rights, but the issue is how we can reach a wider range of people. The disability equality duty has been mentioned as a potential driver for change. We support the DRC's proposal, which was given in its evidence, that the Scottish Executive and Audit Scotland should monitor and evaluate performance under that duty.

Awareness and changes in attitude could come about through concerted media efforts that were aimed at people throughout society from as early an age as possible. Those efforts should not focus solely on the DDA. Some people do not know that they come within the scope of the DDA, so efforts that focus solely on the DDA may not catch the people whom we want to catch.

Yvonne Brown: We are developing materials on the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and on SENDA—the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. The materials, which are very accessible, use case studies to explain the legislation in context. They will be distributed through the branded centre network but, again, they will be available to everybody. It is important to raise awareness of the legislation and to get the message out.

Alison Cox: When we talk about inclusive and equitable education, we need to ensure that we do not create gaps by referring to what I call cohort-specific legislation. Each piece of legislation is powerful and important in its own right, but our argument at the BRITE initiative is that we need to go beyond that to an implementation of inclusiveness that considers, respects and empowers students without being overly focused on particular categories—disability, ethnic minorities, sexual orientation, gender, age and so on. I am not diminishing any individual entitlements, but the key is to present the legislation in a way that is inclusive.

I echo something that Sue Pinder said earlier. If a learning provider does a good job and gets it right for all students, it is likely that it will do a good job for the potentially marginalised groups.

Lesley Berry: DDA awareness could be built into programmes for school leavers or induction programmes for new students at college or university.

Nora Radcliffe: The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 came into force last year. What are the early indications of the operation of the act? How are your organisations using the act and how well is it working?

The Convener: We accept that it is early days.

Rona Connolly: It is indeed. The early assessment from our work in the community is that, although groups of professionals who support adult learning are being brought together to consider the impact of the transition, little is in place to support people in the progression out of school and into the community. People are willing to act in partnership to address needs, but there is little co-ordination. We are keeping a watching brief on the implementation as it impacts on school leavers, who might not go straight into a college or other learning environment but might want to return to learning at a later stage.

Lead Scotland is represented on the advisory group for the Enquire helpline, which is run by Children in Scotland and funded by the Scottish Executive Education Department, and we are aware that callers to that helpline are asking about additional support for learning. The helpline is run for young people and carers, but it is also accessed by professional individuals including those in local authorities. There is a readiness for information, which needs to be available.

Alison Cox: The 2004 act has potential to be a useful tool, particularly in relation to the client group that is the focus of our discussion today. If the co-ordinated support plan operates effectively, it has potential to be instrumental in tidying up a lot of the miscommunication that has been highlighted during your evidence gathering.

It is early days. I spent last week—and I will spend some time during the next three weeks—working in partnership with Learning and Teaching Scotland on the rolling out of regional seminars on inclusion. In particular, we are considering running workshops on the practical application of co-ordinated support plans. My most recent audience comprised guidance teachers, other teachers and local authority education officers and I was struck by the extent to which the notion that post-school partnerships will be a crucial and inherent aspect had passed them by. We have a role, as post-school providers, in ensuring that that is no longer the case. However, those of us on both sides of the bridge that we call transition will need to be

much more strenuously involved if we are to ensure that the co-ordinated support plan is not only constructed with the individual at the centre, but that those individuals feel ownership of it and therefore take it with them along their learning journey.

I have always thought that the act was intended to support transition. However, on the basis of our early contact with its implementation, I am worried that, although there is still a sense that the act is a very useful tool in a single context for ensuring that support has been put in place, it is not yet being exploited for that original purpose.

The phrase "seamless transition" is bandied around, but I am not a fan of it because it oversimplifies the process. Transition is a complicated process for anyone, particularly for people who have a range of additional needs. The use of the word "seamless" to describe transition is not necessarily a good thing—seams are bad only if gaps appear or if they become unpicked. We ought to be looking at the facilities that the co-ordinated support plan and the act provide to ensure that they are joined up. We can have seams if they are well joined; the communication between agencies needs to be effective, consistent and rigorous.

12:45

Nora Radcliffe: The point about semantics is a good one; words are quite powerful.

The Convener: At the event that the committee held in June 2005 for young disabled people, concerns were raised about the absence of a residential college in Scotland. It was said that the provision of such a college would remove some of the barriers to accessing further and higher education. What are your views on whether Scotland should have a residential college?

Yvonne Brown: I am concerned about the idea of a single institution. However, earlier today, when one of the witnesses—I think that it was Sue Pinder—spoke about the number of colleges with residential provision, I began to wonder whether we could have some sort of horizontal grouping of colleges to create—I apologise in advance for the terminology—a virtual centre of excellence. Such a centre could encourage the sharing of best practice and knowledge across all the institutions that have appropriate residential facilities and further push that good practice out into the community.

I confess that my first instinct on hearing the question was that that would be a wonderful thing. My colleagues at the RNIB have described the issues that arise when people are sent away to college—it can be a nightmare. Perhaps we could build on existing good practice and available resources; we could link institutions thematically and horizontally so that they are not simply parts of separate institutions but become a virtual institution. Something like that could act as a starting point.

Lesley Berry: I agree with Yvonne Brown. To some extent, building on existing provision would take away the fear that, just because a student has complex needs, they are pigeonholed into going to the residential centre; they should at least have an element of choice. All existing colleges can share good practice with one another.

Alison Cox: It is interesting that one of the main criticisms of the lack of residential college provision in Scotland for students with complex needs, which results in them having to go south of the border, relates not to the expense—although the purse-holders made that argument—but to the fact that their parents, significant others, families and friends lost contact with them when they were in residential accommodation. The students are taken away, given a hugely intensive and often very positive experience and then deposited back into the community that they left one or two years previously. We need to be careful not to assume that the development of a residential provision in Scotland would immediately remove that disadvantage. One of the strengths of the residential experience is its ability to prepare the learner for what lies ahead. Sometimes, it is easier to do that if the learner is not completely removed from their local community.

People with complex needs should have the opportunity to participate in residential provision if it meets their needs. We should look at the way in which such provision could best be delivered. Some of the suggestions that have been made this morning seem worthy of exploration, but I do not think that we should rush into the creation of a Scottish residential college for people with complex needs. For someone from Kirkwall, for example, a residential college that was located in Stirling would be as inconvenient as one that was located in Harrogate. There are definite attractions in having residential provision and the opportunity to be engaged 24/7 in an inclusive learning experience, but we ought to be clear that we would have to ask the potential beneficiaries what they, their families and their significant others feel about it. It would be dangerous for a provider representative to say that we should go for a residential college. I am not sure that we know enough about what the take-up would be or, indeed, what the advantages and disadvantages would be.

Rona Connolly: I agree entirely with Alison Cox's view on that. In our submission, we rather sat on the fence about what would be best. We want to ensure that choice is available and that

transparency of process and consistent information and advice are also available; currently that is not the case.

The Convener: We have covered many issues, but do you have something else to say that you feel we need to hear?

Rona Connolly: I have one brief point. When we talked about transition, we focused on the transition from school to further learning. However, it is equally important to consider the transition from colleges and universities to other routes. Lead Scotland's particular interest is in the next steps after college, whether they are into employment, supported employment, volunteering opportunities or whatever. There is a need for continuity of support and partnership working to ensure that the best options are laid in front of the individual and that choice is available.

Lesley Berry: In the earlier session, a question was asked about careers advice and whether there is a source of information on disabilities. Skill Scotland has a handbook for careers advisers. I think that it was distributed a couple of years ago, but we get the impression that it is perhaps not used widely enough. However, it is still available.

The Convener: Thank you all for your helpful evidence.

Equalities Review

12:52

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is on the proposal to hold a review into the current state of play in equalities and identify priorities for moving forward. Do members have any comments on the general approach paper?

Marlyn Glen: I am delighted to see that we are being cautious about how wide ranging the review might be and whether it will cover all strands and fields.

The Convener: We will consider what areas we should cover. We want to know whether members feel that the proposed review is a good idea.

Marlyn Glen: It is definitely a good idea.

John Swinburne: We should consider the gender imbalance in pensions. It is ludicrous that the Government gets away with giving only 50 per cent to females. Another basic inequality is that if a single person goes into a residential home, their home is sold to pay for that, whereas if someone who is married or who lives with a partner goes into a residential home, their home is not sold. That situation could easily be challenged under the European convention on human rights. We should not tolerate the situation and should highlight it.

The Convener: So members are happy with the idea of having an equalities review. We will consider the criteria for it.

John Swinburne: Also, the racial imbalance in this Parliament is a joke.

The Convener: Absolutely.

John Swinburne: No ethnic minorities are represented in the whole Parliament.

The Convener: Are members content with the proposal in paragraphs 5 to 11 of the approach paper? The suggestion is that the equalities review should consist of a research exercise and a consultation event; that the research specification should be considered at our meeting on 21 February; that the consultation event should be held in the Parliament as described; and that the committee should publish the outcomes of the review.

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: Are members happy to delegate responsibility to the clerks and me for progressing the matter?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Meeting closed at 12:54.

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