EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 21 February 2006

Session 2

£5.00

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by Astron.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 21 February 2006

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

4th 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:

Lorna Caldwell (Student Awards Agency for Scotland)
Scott Cuthbertson (National Union of Students Scotland)
Gail Edwards (National Union of Students Scotland)
Leia Fitzgerald (Student Awards Agency for Scotland)
Ruth Hendery (Jewel and Esk Valley College)
Katy McCloskey (Coalition of Higher Education Students in Scotland)
Miki Quigley (Cumbernauld College)
Dr Jenny Rees (Glasgow Caledonian University)
Alan Scott (Student Awards Agency for Scotland)
Anne Simpson (University of Strathclyde)

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 21 February 2006

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:38*]

Disability Inquiry

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the fourth meeting in 2006 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind all present that mobile phones should be turned off, as they interfere with our sound system. I have received apologies from Elaine Smith.

The first item on our agenda is our disability inquiry. This is our second formal evidence session on the theme of further and higher education. I am pleased to welcome Katy McCloskey, from the Coalition of Higher Education Students in Scotland, and Scott Cuthbertson and Gail Edwards, from the National Union of Students Scotland. We have a lot of material to get through, so we will start with questions right away. You will have an opportunity at the end to raise any issue that has not been raised in our questions.

I will start with careers advice. Your organisations represent students, so you may well be aware of issues regarding the appropriateness and adequacy of careers advice for young disabled people, both prior to and during further education. I am interested in your experience and the concerns that students have expressed to you.

Scott Cuthbertson (National Union of Students Scotland): I welcome this opportunity for NUS Scotland to give evidence to the committee on behalf of the students whom we represent. We feel that careers advisers can have quite a limited knowledge of the issues surrounding disabilities and disabled students. That can lead to negative stereotypes running through the system. We also think that the careers advice that is given to pupils in specialist schools can be under par compared with the advice that is given in mainstream education.

We have a number of suggestions and ideas that we think would lead to an improvement in the careers advice system, including the appointment of lead specialists in each local authority and improved training in disability issues for all careers advisers. That training should cover the provisions of part IV of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, people's rights to benefits and the access to work scheme. There should be more links with organisations such as Skill Scotland and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People and we should consider a more person-centred approach to careers advice. The existing approach often involves someone ticking the right boxes or deciding which category a student fits into, rather than sitting down with the student and saying, "What is your opinion on what you want to do?"

We should consider developing a resource for careers advisers that contains positive images of disabled students and good disabled role models. That would help to develop good practice in the sector. We must engage disabled people and ask them what they want from the careers advice service rather than focusing on the categories that the service wants them to fit into.

The Convener: That is helpful. You mentioned special schools. Do you think that there is an issue about attitudes in special schools and people's ideas about what disabled students are capable of doing, or is there just a lack of links with the careers service?

Scott Cuthbertson: It can come down to attitudes, although staff in special schools acknowledge the issues a lot more widely than those in mainstream education do. Perhaps the boxes that they have to tick are a lot more varied and they are too busy ticking the boxes to think, "Let's get them out of the special sector and put them into the mainstream education sector." There should be a greater focus on mainstreaming disability issues.

Katy McCloskey (Coalition of Higher Education Students in Scotland): I agree with pretty much everything that Scott Cuthbertson said. I can speak only for the higher education sector and not for further education, but I believe that not enough disabled students are told what they can do. That applies to schools as well. When pupils are thinking about moving on to further or higher education, they are not encouraged enough or given enough information about what they can do when they get into FE or HE. A lot of the focus is on the negative and on what they cannot do.

There is a lot of misinformation. For example, deaf people are told that they cannot be teachers, but that is not necessarily true. Blind people are told that they cannot study architecture, but that is not necessarily true either. An awful lot of people say, "You can't do this and you can't do that." Disabled people need to be encouraged and told that they can do what they want to do and that schools and colleges will work hard to ensure that adjustments are made.

Sometimes, careers services have a limited knowledge of disabled students and their needs. Recently, Careers Scotland got rid of its special needs advisers and now all advisers at Careers Scotland are expected to know about all areas of disability and to match the needs of a student to availability in the sector. I think that that is quite wrong. A lot of the disabled students I spoke to said that their needs are sometimes brushed under the carpet and that advisers do not know how to deal with them. For example, some students did not know whether they would be able to work full time or whether they could try things out. Stress has a big impact on some conditions and the students wanted to know whether there were jobs and courses that did not incur high levels of stress. They told me that, often, careers advisers could not cope with that question because they did not have specialised knowledge.

Key workers are useful, not only because they can give the right advice initially but because they can encourage the disabled student and go with them when they go along to find out about their prospective institution. Careers Scotland uses key workers for 16 to 18-year-old potential students from non-traditional university backgrounds or care homes. The key worker holds the student's hand—so to speak—during the first stages of university life. That can include tasks such as taking the student to university or giving them a ring in the morning. Key workers also check universities and colleges to ensure that they are suitable for a student's needs. They give a student encouragement and can help him or her along in investigations beforehand. That can be beneficial for a disabled student. A student without a disability has much to find out about university before going there, and that is much more of an issue for a student with a disability. The period between August and September, after examination results come out, can be a stressful time. A disabled student must pick a university and find out whether it will meet his or her needs and about transport arrangements. In such cases, a key worker system would be beneficial.

09:45

The Convener: We have been told that a key worker scheme run along local authority lines would be helpful. However, you are suggesting that an approach involving Careers Scotland would be better.

In relation to transitions, what more could further and higher education providers do to ensure that support, such as adaptive technology and course materials in alternative formats, is in place before courses begin?

Katy McCloskey: A key worker could be very beneficial in helping out a disabled student. However, having a key worker might not necessarily solve the transition problems. Transition can be a terribly traumatic time for a non-disabled student and, for a disabled student, there are many more problems that must be sorted out before they attend university. A key worker alone cannot resolve those issues.

It would be very useful if a disabled student had access to his or her assisted technologies before they went to university. That would allow him or her to get used to them so that they would be ready when they start the course. However, that does not happen because the disabled students allowance is not normally given out before the start of term. The application process is long and bureaucratic. If money from the disabled students allowance was made available before they attended university, the student could gain experience of equipment. It would also be helpful if they were given knowledge about lectures, course notes and all the other matters that can be daunting for non-disabled students and which are even more so for disabled students. That would help the transition to further or higher education.

A key worker alone will not solve the problems, as there are institutional matters that need to be resolved in the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and the university sector. Much more central support needs to be given to disabled students.

The Convener: Thank you. We will be hearing from SAAS later.

Would Scott Cuthbertson or Gail Edwards like to add anything to the discussion on transitions?

Scott Cuthbertson: We believe that a key worker approach is the right way to go, although it will not solve every problem. Our biggest fear is that if individual staff are put in to deal with each disabled student, that will lead to a whole new process that disabled students will have to go through but which mainstream students will not. That could lengthen the waiting period before disabled students enter further or higher education and lead to new complexities in the system. Also, although key workers are a good idea, it should be more about having more than one key worker—perhaps having three key workers who will be able to support the team of workers already on the ground and deal with any backlogs that develop.

To add to what Katy McCloskey said, a disabled student should have the opportunity, perhaps a month before a course starts, to adapt to the learning environment and deal with circumstances that may arise. It can be quite a move to go into further and higher education, but the student should not have to face a financial burden for doing so. Each student should receive some help in adapting to the surroundings a little bit better.

The Convener: Would it be helpful for a disabled student to attend a course earlier, to ensure that the adaptive technology is available? We heard that, for some universities and colleges, the technology works well, but in others it does not. Students find that they do not have the appropriate computer hardware or software that they need to be able to work. How can that be overcome?

Scott Cuthbertson: Much of that will come down to more even assessments of disabled students to identify their best learning styles and the technology that they could use to improve their learning experience. As Katy McCloskey said, the students need to be able to use the systems easily and to go in early enough to work out how the systems will improve their learning experience. A lot of the systems that are in place are quite complicated, and they may not be what some students want or need.

Gail Edwards (National Union of Students Scotland): I can give you an illustration of a model that works quite well. The University of Stirling has a good system. A student who is thinking about applying to the University of Stirling can visit the university and spend the day with information technology people and support workers to find out more about the services that would be available to them if they decided to attend the university. The students to whom we have spoken who have benefited from that all feel that the main reason why they decided to attend the university was the fact that they felt reassured. The visit also gives the university the opportunity to assess the students' needs and the level of support that they would require if they attended the university. It helps to break the ice and allows the university to assess what IT support and so on the students would require.

If a student decides that they would like to attend the University of Stirling, they attend another induction day before the other students join them. That is done through peer support, with other disabled students who are already at the university introducing the prospective students to the layout of the campus and giving them some training in all the IT equipment that they might need to use. That seems a very successful model.

Katy McCloskey: Transition is not just about assisted technology; a lot of reasonable adjustments regarding teaching and learning methods need to be carried out by an institution right at the start of the term. That is one of the biggest problems for disabled students. It is not just about not getting their equipment on time, not getting their forms filled in on time, and not getting their money on time; it is also about what happens when they get to lectures and the classroom, getting notes in advance and arranging meetings with lecturers. I do not think that those problems should be overlooked. A lot of the time, the transition is a settling-in period, and institutions are perhaps reluctant to view lecturers being late with notes, not meeting students when they need to be met or not talking to them before classes as discrimination. By weeks 3 and 4, however, someone who is only just getting their notes is already behind. They are already suffering and cannot hand in their coursework on time.

Many of the issues that can cause students to get behind and feel that everything is against them are not related to technology. Many students to whom we have spoken feel that they are constantly pestering people by knocking on doors and saying, “Hello. I’m disabled. You’ve got to do this for me.” Although they must make those contacts, they should not have to. Things should be there and be ready, but that is not the experience of most disabled students. Things—and not just the technology—are not normally ready for week 1.

The Convener: It is about people being organised and being aware of what students need.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): I am interested in what the panel has said about the transition to university and what happens when a student is at university. You will be aware of the disability premium funding that universities can get from the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. Would it help if that funding was in place before the students went to university? Could it have a dual role?

Katy McCloskey: Disability premium funding is limited. The money is given to the institution to use as it sees fit. For example, some institutions use it to help disabled students with technologies that they might need in certain departments or to service groups that enable students with Asperger’s syndrome to get together.

In my experience, however—although I could be wrong—the issue is with applications for disabled students allowance. If the money for that came through before term started, that would be the most helpful thing. At the moment, disabled students apply when they get to university. Sometimes, more than 100 people are applying for the allowance, and most applications take about eight hours to complete, so you can understand how disability services are swamped. It then takes about a month to process the applications, and when the money comes back, the technology has to be bought. The students then have to be trained in how to use the technology—which is awkward at the best of times and hard for non-disabled people—and they have to start to get used to it.

As I said, it is important that students start to use the technology before they come to university. Perhaps they should be introduced to it at school and get their applications done over the summer. The problem is that SAAS does not accept early applications; if it did, that would mean not only that disability services within universities would have more time to deal with the needs of students when they arrive, but that students would have their technology already in week 1. The sad fact is that, by the time that week 1 comes along, most disabled students have not filled in their application, or they do not have the money—

Ms White: The fund can finance advisers, too.

The Convener: We will discuss funding shortly.

Ms White: I am sorry; I just wondered whether advisers would represent a step forward.

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): What examples can the panel give us of good practice in supporting disabled students in further and higher education?

Scott Cuthbertson: Gail Edwards mentioned good practice at the University of Stirling, which leads the way in the HE sector in Scotland on disabled learning, from the application process to learning by disabled learners at the institution. Aberdeen College has a disabled student forum that works throughout the college, which students find extremely helpful, because information passes back and forth between them and the forum about course work, systems and so on. Those are the two main examples that we have of good practice in the HE and FE sectors.

Katy McCloskey: I tried to find out about good practice. It says a lot that, when I asked disabled students what good practice their institutions had, they said, "None." That speaks volumes. However, at the University of Strathclyde, a good use of the premium that Sandra White talked about is for an Asperger's group. Many Asperger's students at university are quite isolated, so a user group was established to allow them to meet, to talk about the problems of being at university and of transition and to support one another. However, it was hard to find out from students whether their institutions had good practice.

Scott Cuthbertson: If there is a strong students association, an autonomous group of students with disabilities or a disabled students group can take good practice issues to the association's governing body. Many universities and colleges have disabled students officers.

Katy McCloskey: Scott Cuthbertson is right, but students associations have many problems in establishing disabled students groups. Sometimes, they are much harder to set up than lesbian, gay and bisexual groups or women's groups, because a terrible problem in HE—and, I presume, in FE—is underdisclosure of disabilities, particularly in mental health. A students association is only as good as the people who actively represent the students. Sometimes, it can be hard to give disabled students a voice if they do not come forth and become involved in the campaign. Much of that is to do with stigma and attitudes, but we must tackle the massive underdisclosure, particularly in mental health.

The Convener: That is a good point.

John Swinburne: The committee heard at its consultation events about pretendy courses that have no meaningful outcomes or qualifications. What can further and higher education providers do to ensure that students have sufficient choice in their courses?

The Convener: That question is about further education, so perhaps Gail Edwards or Scott Cuthbertson could answer.

Gail Edwards: A few issues relate to extended learning support and dominant programme group 18 courses. The weighting that those courses attract from the funding council means that there is a better chance that a college will encourage a student to participate in such a course, rather than a mainstream course. For example, one of our students achieved good higher results at school and wanted to go to university but to do an access course first at college. When he turned up at the college, he was ushered on to a dominant programme group 18 course to learn about cooking, although he wanted to do an access course in IT.

The funding implications create a problem that perhaps needs to be considered—that goes back to the need for a more person-centred approach to assessing an individual student's needs and wishes, rather than a tick-box exercise. There is not necessarily one solution to the problem of students being ushered on to pretendy courses. A specialist course in social skills or cooking is a useful exercise for some students, but it is not right for others. Instead of having a tick-box exercise, as can happen at present, a better, one-to-one, person-centred approach needs to be taken to assessing a student's needs and wishes.

10:00

Scott Cuthbertson: Students get into university or college on the basis of academic credit. Why should that not be the same for a disabled student? Why should they be siphoned off to do DPG 18 courses when they have already proven that they have an academic credit record that could sustain them through the course that they want to take? As Gail Edwards said, if a more student-centred approach was taken, learning programmes would be modified so that disabled students could participate in all courses instead of being told that they cannot be accommodated.

Gail Edwards: If a student is put on to a dominant programme group 18 course, a clear progression route towards a mainstream course should be set out for them. Some colleges do that very well. The funding council asks colleges to provide evidence of student learning support plans and progression routes. As I said, there is good practice in the sector on such routes, but some colleges are failing to achieve that good practice.

Katy McCloskey: Obviously, I cannot speak about DPG courses. I return to what I said before, which is that not enough disabled students are encouraged either in school or university to do the things that they want to do, and they are not given enough information about what they can do. It would be useful for students to be able to access a key worker—someone who could carry them through from school and help them to find out which course they could do and what adjustments could be made.

Not enough disabled students are aware of their rights; they do not know that adjustments can be made. The universities and professional bodies that deal with courses need to begin to be aware that, if possible, disabled students should be able to do things differently. For example, a department might say that a field trip is an essential part of a geography course when there could be other ways in which a student could cover the field trip programme. Students really need to be given that information.

Not enough prospectuses give disabled students the information that they need to encourage them to go to university. Certainly, that is the case in higher education. Even photographs, for example, can be a problem. The other day, I looked at a prospectus that included information on a sports science degree course. The pictures were all of people on treadmills, running about and doing energetic, physical things and yet the course is all about the science of sport. There is nothing to prevent someone with a physical disability from doing that course. However, anyone looking at the photographs would get the wrong impression of the course. Students need to be made aware that adjustments can be made, and institutions need to start to realise that they have to make adjustments and help students to get the information that they need.

Prospectuses definitely need to have more information about what disabled students can do. They tend to say that students have to do field trips or go outwith the university on six-month trips abroad and so on, which can be off-putting for disabled students. Prospectuses need to be clear about which activities students have to do—those that are core to the subject—and which activities would just be good for them. If people do not make that distinction, it can be off-putting for students. They might not apply for a course if they feel that they cannot do it.

John Swinburne: The committee has received written evidence that there should be more vocational courses, perhaps developed with supported employment providers, to assist people to gain core employment skills. What are your thoughts on that suggestion?

Scott Cuthbertson: We have a strong feeling that students with disabilities often think that they are being steered towards vocational work because of the preconceptions or stigma that surround their disability. I agree that there should be a core focus on employability skills, but that should be for all students, not only disabled students.

Guidance on employability should be geared towards the wishes of the learner; it should have a learner-specific rather than a course-specific focus. On the specialist advice that is made available to disabled students, they need to be made more aware of their rights, including employability rights and rights under the DDA, especially the part IV measures that were introduced recently.

On the financial advantages to colleges of putting students through DPG 18 courses, I should add that a college sometimes thinks that it is in its best interests to do so because it gets more money. However, we must level the playing field by ensuring that there are no financial advantages in putting students on those courses.

John Swinburne: Lack of flexibility in certain courses has been highlighted as a problem in written evidence to the committee. Are courses flexible enough?

Scott Cuthbertson: NUS Scotland has heard of a number of cases in which students who want either to record their lectures or to be given the lecture notes before the lecture have been told by the lecturer, “I’m sorry, but I cannot allow that. The lecture is intellectual property.” That is a bit strange. After all, students are expected to take notes at lectures; why can disabled students not have the same opportunity to benefit from the lecture system? Lecturers should not penalise disabled students; instead, they should disregard the intellectual property argument and allow their lectures to be recorded.

I agree with Katy McCloskey that although field trips can be important, there are alternatives to that kind of work and students should be able to decide themselves whether field trips are important to them or whether some other route might be more applicable to their learning style or needs.

To improve courses, we must ensure that lecture notes are electronically available, perhaps on the student intranet, and that we design more interactive classes that, instead of being based on assessments at the very end of the course, focus more on checking a student’s understanding of the subject. We might also need to challenge the use of outdated terminology in lectures. For example, on one particular chemistry course, the word “retarded” was used constantly.

John Swinburne: Are you actually prevented from recording lectures, or is doing so permissible?

Scott Cuthbertson: There is great disparity across Scotland. Although I have never been prevented from recording any lectures at Paisley University, NUS Scotland has heard of students being told that they cannot do so because the lecture itself is intellectual property.

John Swinburne: Obviously, it would be advantageous to roll out the approach that you have described across the country.

Scott Cuthbertson: I hope that that will happen.

Katy McCloskey: Flexibility is not taken seriously enough when academic courses are designed. The fact that lectures, particularly in higher education, are very central to courses can cause problems for students who might have to miss them for various health reasons or who do not feel that they can take in all the information. Courses, lectures and tutorials must be flexible enough to ensure that all students can get all the notes and information without necessarily having to sit in a lecture theatre and copy them down themselves.

Another big problem is that lecturers can be reluctant to make the reasonable adjustments that are created at the start of the term. Sometimes those adjustments can be made later on. After all, at the start of term, disability services can be overworked with 100 or more students wanting to create their adjustments. However, the fact that lecturers can take a while to adjust to adjustments such as giving out course notes beforehand or e-mailing notes the night before can set students back in the first couple of weeks.

As I said earlier, there is reluctance to view non-compliance with adjustments as discrimination. In my experience, it can take as much as four weeks’ worth of pestering—every lecture, two lectures a week—and saying, “You did not send me the notes. Can I get them?” Sometimes notes are sent at 20 to 12 the night before, because the lecturer has only just created them. Institutions need to realise that that is simply not good enough; I need my sleep like anyone else and it is not good enough to get notes 12 hours before the class. Institutions need to start addressing those issues.

Provision of course notes is not the only issue. Courses should be designed so that students can understand them—for example, the course could be put on an interactive website. There are some good examples in the faculty of education at the University of Strathclyde, where the lecture is videoed and available on the web half an hour after the class is finished. Students who miss the class benefit and even people who were at the class can check to see whether they got everything down. A lot of disabled students worry about missing out on what happens in the lecture and it can be hard if the lecturers do not comply with the required adjustments.

Often adjustments are made so that students have to meet their lecturer every semester to enable the lecturer to find out how the student is getting on with the course and to chat to them and find out whether they are okay. I know of many students who have to pester constantly to get that appointment. There is a dismissive attitude among the lecturers. They feel that they are overworked, and one of the last things to get done is adjustments for disabled students. That is not good enough.

Gail Edwards: There is a very useful project in further education, to which I would like to draw the committee’s attention. The quality and equality of learning and teaching materials project is examining ways of producing a toolkit that will enable lecturers to develop their own, more inclusive, curriculum materials for students. The project, which is being funded by the Scottish funding council, is run out of Stevenson College and covers all sorts of needs whether they relate to race, religion, disability or sexual orientation. That is happening only in further education, and I hope that the QELTM model will be rolled out to the higher education sector.

Katy McCloskey: There is also the teachability project, which is about encouraging lecturers to build their classes flexibly and to write their prospectuses to be encouraging. That is a very good system for making things more open.

Scott Cuthbertson: A further point on the teachability project is that lecturers should perhaps receive disability training as part of their continuing professional development once every few months to top up their skills and ensure that they are meeting the needs of everyone in their class.

John Swinburne: What more could further and higher education providers do to make adjustments to their courses?

Katy McCloskey: As Scott Cuthbertson said, training is very important. Some institutions make training in the accessible curriculum compulsory for new lecturers and postgraduate tutors, but some institutions do not do that with the result that new tutors who come into academia slip through the net unless they want to go along and get the training. The people who take the training are often those who do not need it; it is those who are reluctant to provide the adjustments and flexibility who need the training but will not go. Unless the training is made compulsory, we will not get anywhere, certainly with higher education.

The teachability project is a good example of how information can be provided to a lecturer so that they can make their course flexible, their field trip accessible or their prospectus welcoming to disabled students. I could go on about what the teachability project provides, but unless it is made compulsory in higher education, it will not have a massive impact on the whole sector.

Gail Edwards: The demographics of lecturing staff in colleges and universities show that very few of them are disabled. That is quite telling of the traditional university environment, which is changing but very slowly. There is still not enough representation of disabled people in the workforce.

John Swinburne: That is obviously a result of the old methods of doing things; it is to be hoped that that will improve.

10:15

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): We have had a lot of written and oral evidence on funding. It would be quite good if you could address not just the Scottish funding council's funding, but that of Scottish Enterprise, because it is a large funder of vocational education as well.

I know that that is relevant only to the further education sector, but it is significant. What barriers do you think might be created because of funding? We have heard about that in some of the evidence that we have taken. Can you provide information on the waiting time that is needed to sort out funding and to get through the maze of funding streams, particularly for students with disabilities? If you agree with that evidence, what recommendations could we make that would make the process simpler and create fewer barriers?

Gail Edwards: About 50 per cent of the cases involving disabled students that I deal with in my role as education officer for the NUS are about the struggle to get funding in time. One of the most significant issues, particularly in higher education, is the assessment of needs. At the moment, that is a long, protracted process that can be quite difficult.

Some universities fund the student's needs assessment. However, if a student arrives at university and it is realised that they have dyslexia, for example, they may be asked to pay for their assessment by an educational psychologist, at a cost of about £230. Yesterday afternoon I worked out that that is 5 per cent of the annual income of a student based on public funds, so it is a significant amount of money for a student to fork out in the hope that they may be able to get some assistance. It is wrong to ask them to do that. They may get the money back afterwards if they are successful in obtaining disability allowance from SAAS, but it is absolutely wrong to expect them to pay it in the first place.

The assessment process needs to be more centrally managed. At the moment it is piecemeal and can take a great deal of time. One student applied for a laptop to help him with his needs; he applied in his first year, just after starting his university course, and received the laptop halfway through his final year. We hear that kind of story repeatedly—the process takes far too long. We want a better process that would allow needs to be assessed quickly and efficiently.

Another problem with funding is that there are many different ways in which a student can be supported. In a way, that is a good thing, but it is also a bad thing, as there are many organisations and lots of forms to fill in, which can be stressful and difficult, particularly at a time that is already difficult and stressful for a student.

Katy McCloskey spoke about getting funding organised in advance, which would ease the pressure on students and institutions. That would be a good step forward and would help students to get the equipment and whatever else they need before they start, so that they are just as ready to start their course as other people are when they turn up at university or college.

The disabled students premium was mentioned. We are concerned that the policy as it stands encourages bad practice, rather than good practice, in the sector, because the funds that universities are given are based on disabled students allowance claims from the previous year. That results in a disparity if a higher number of disabled students attend university in one year than in another, as the funding that universities receive the next year is based on figures from the previous year. Because the funds are not ring fenced, there is no accountability and the funds are not necessarily invested in the areas for which they are intended. In further education, the funds for extended learning support are ring fenced by the funding council, so the money goes to the appropriate areas. However, that does not happen in higher education. We would like that issue to be addressed.

Many different funds are available to students in further education. The level of support that they can get when doing a further education course is less than that which they would get for a higher education course. We are in favour of a DSA-style top-up for further education students, because they do not have the flexibility to choose to spend some money on having a family member or friend give them additional learning support, which is possible in higher education. Those services are very much provided by the college, so we do not have the same flexibility as we do in higher education. We would like that disparity to be addressed.

Katy McCloskey: To echo what Gail Edwards said about the DSA, I cannot make the point often enough that assessment needs to happen earlier so that funding and equipment are ready for the start of term. Sometimes the problem is that the forms can take a long time to be processed. The question of why the form has to be so lengthy has come up a lot in my investigations. There are a great deal of questions on the DSA application form, such as what the student's adjustments were previously and what adjustments will need to be made. The form is long and laborious. I question the need for all those questions—I wonder why SAAS needs to know those things. It could be the form that is holding up the application process. As I said, the forms can take eight hours to get sorted; if there are 100 new students in an institution, that is a long time.

There is a cap on the DSA and sometimes it runs out. There was a case recently of a blind student whose core textbook for the year was translated into Braille, which cost a couple of thousand pounds. After that, he was told that he could not get any more money for a scribe or for any further equipment that he needed to pass his course. Some institutions will pick up the cost of further equipment that is needed, but that is not the case across the board. In some institutions in Scotland, when students reach their cap that is it—they do not receive any more money. That is wrong. There are about eight to 10 cases every year in which institutions have to pick up the cost. Some of them are to do with blind students and scribes and some of them are to do with deaf students.

Many disabled students have to study part time because it can be too stressful for them to study full time. However, the problem with part-time funding is that you get a loan of only £500 from SAAS, whereas if you are full time the maximum that you are entitled to is about £4,500. If you do 50 per cent of the course, you do not get 50 per cent of the funding. That is unfair. I presume that SAAS gives out only £500 for students when they study part time because it assumes that they can work part time, but many disabled students cannot work, and even if they can work, they struggle doing a course as well. Even 50 per cent of a course takes up all your time. Disabled students have to put a lot of extra hours into university and simply do not have the time to work; many of them are on incapacity benefit and are not allowed to work. The funding from SAAS is a great barrier to students studying part time. Many disabled students are forced to study full time to get the money, then they feel that they have to resit. If they had to work to support themselves while they were studying part time, they would risk losing their housing benefit or their incapacity benefit if they worked more than 16 hours a week. That is an unfair situation.

Some universities have systems in which they have part-time repeaters—the system has different names depending on the institution, such as registration with attendance—in which, if someone fails a year, they can go back and redo a class and sit the exam. That applies to up to 50 per cent of the course and full funding—the maximum loan entitlement—is available for the year. I would like a system like that to be introduced for disabled students throughout education. It can be a struggle to have to choose between whether to do a course that you know you can cope with and having no money, and doing a course that you cannot cope with to get the loan. That is not a fair choice—disabled students should not have to make that choice. It is definitely a barrier.

Students have to pay the first £155 of their travel costs, which is unfair for those disabled students who are part time and cannot work. They should not have to pay the first £155. There is a big problem with taxis. If there is some reason why you cannot take public transport to university and there are times when you have to take a taxi, you must get a letter from the doctor to say that you can never use public transport. However, that might not be the case; for example, a student with eyesight difficulties perhaps cannot use public transport at night because it is too dark but can use the bus during the day. Many students have mental health problems and find it hard to ask for a letter from the doctor to say that, so they are forced to pay for the taxi themselves. That definitely needs to be addressed.

Scott Cuthbertson: I want to talk about two big barriers in funding. First, disabled students have to get their DSA applications signed by their institution. As Katy McCloskey mentioned, disclosure is a big problem for such students, as they might not want to disclose to their institution that they have a disability. That can be a big barrier, so we do not think that the institution should have to sign off a DSA application.

Community care charges are a big barrier even before someone goes into education. Fundamentally, people go into education to better their lifestyle, to get a good job and to increase their prospects. Disabled students face the prospect of huge community care charges that will sap away their money month after month. If they end up earning £50,000 a year, £40,000 of which is taken away from them, they will not get the benefits of what the education system has to offer. They see no prospect of a better lifestyle. We need to look fundamentally at the community care charges system, so that going into education will offer disabled people the same benefits that it offers everyone else.

Marilyn Livingstone: I will follow that up by asking about the support that is available to help disabled students negotiate their way through the maze of college and university funding. How easy is it for them to access information on the courses and funding that are available? Are they aware of the help and support that they can get? How easy is it for them to find the right information?

Scott Cuthbertson: It varies across the country. There are many excellent examples of institutions that employ good practice, such as the University of Stirling, but there is no parity across HE and FE institutions. When I went to university, I knew nothing about such matters and very little information came my way to help me to look for further advice. The adviser in my students association was able to point me in the right direction.

We should consider setting guidelines for universities and colleges. There should be a bare minimum of information that they have to provide, but through good practice we should encourage them to do better than that. The issue is about sharing good practice. It might be a good idea to appoint a caseworker at SAAS to deal specifically with such matters; they could put out more information for disabled students.

Katy McCloskey: There are two issues. There is the information that someone needs to enable them to choose their university and there is the information that they need before they go to university. The information that is provided in prospectuses has been mentioned. Not enough is done to ensure that the prospectus information provides the answers to the questions that disabled students want answered. It is not enough just to tag on answers to possible questions at the end of the prospectus. Universities need to be extremely careful when they describe their courses and their campuses. They must say what needs to be done and what can be done—what is compulsory as part of a course and what is not. The wrong information could be highly off-putting for many students before they go to university. They might read a description of a course and think that they cannot do it, but that might just be misinformation. Aspiring young people should not be put off because negative imagery or negative wording is used in a prospectus. That might result in students being pushed into doing courses that they do not want to do. More information needs to be provided.

In that regard, it would be useful for disabled students to have a key worker. When someone picks a university, they have to do a great deal of running around and digging. That is much harder for disabled students, who must think about accessibility, how they will get to university, what transport will be available and where they will live. They must also take into account whether the institution will bend over backwards to help them or whether it will be slightly reluctant to do so. If there was someone to guide disabled students through that process, that would remove much of the stress.

Going to university can be a daunting time for anyone. When disabled students come into higher education, a great deal more information needs to be provided about what is expected of them academically. For example, they will need information on appropriate styles of writing, how to take notes and what lectures will be like. There needs to be some sort of induction process for disabled students—and, perhaps other students—because they need to be shown what they are required to do at university. The first lectures can be daunting for any student. However, for a disabled student—who might have mental health problems or get stressed easily—it can be hard to go into a lecture and learn what to do at the start of the process.

10:30

With regard to general information about university, there almost needs to be a non-academic induction to university that would tell students where things are on campus and so on. A lot of students need to be reassured that they will be able to get about the university, that the city is safe and that the halls of residence are accessible. There needs to be a two-sided induction process and reassurance is the key word. A lot of students with disabilities come to university with a lot of nerves, worries and anxieties about what is expected of them and what lies before them. A lot of non-disabled students have such worries as well, but I think that they are exacerbated when you have already got a disability to worry about and all that sort of baggage to bring with you. I think that creative use of medical personal support and assistance could be quite useful in that regard. Perhaps students who are in fourth year or later on could be available as a contact—rather than a befriender—who can say, “It’s okay, I did this and I got through it” and could induct new disabled students into both sides of the university.

Marilyn Livingstone: Can the initial information that is given be issued in an accessible format?

Katy McCloskey: I have not heard from anyone who has said that the initial information has not been provided in appropriate formats, such as Braille or large print.

Scott Cuthbertson: I am not aware of that either. I would say that we are forgetting that loads of information is available in the voluntary sector already. Perhaps the important issue is to get better links with the voluntary sector and the community education sector. We cannot forget the issue of the student experience. Someone's life experience has a fundamental impact on what they learn. We need to ensure that disabled students have access to the social side of student life and can get information and support from their peers.

Ms White: We all know that the funding cake is getting smaller and smaller. Katy McCloskey said that it would be useful to have someone to tell people exactly what is happening before they get to university. However, what do you think of the fact that, as Gail Edwards has said, the money is not ring fenced? If the money were ring fenced, and if the disabled students premium could be used to fund an adviser who could tell people how to access disability allowances and so on, as well as offering some sort of befriending service, would that help?

Katy McCloskey: An institution in Nottingham ring fences some of its money for pre-entry induction. That is definitely a good idea. Institutions need to be more focused on induction. However, I would like them to get more money for that purpose as I do not think that it should be done at the expense of anything else. By and large, I think that the premium is spent quite well by higher education institutions.

Gail Edwards: We would encourage a befriending service that was organised by the university, although it would probably be better if such an initiative were to come from the students' peers rather than from the university. Perhaps the students association could provide such a service in conjunction with the university or college.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): You have talked a little bit about the perceived stigma around disclosure and we have had a bit of a discussion about training. Do you believe that staff training in disability equality would be a way of combating negative attitudes towards disabled people in further and higher education?

Katy McCloskey: Yes, but only if the training is compulsory, as I said earlier. In my experience, the people who opt for such training are the ones who need it least. They are the ones who are aware and who think about what they say before they say it in case it might have hurtful connotations. They already think about whether their teaching style might create barriers for people with disabilities. The people who do not choose to go on the training are the ones who need it the most, so the training needs to be compulsory, for the new people coming into academia and for the older ones.

Attitudes are a barrier to disclosure, certainly with mental health, where there is a serious problem with underdisclosure because such a stigma is attached to mental illness. That is society's stigma, but not enough is being done to combat it in higher education. Not enough is done to ensure that reasonable adjustments are carried out in respect of mental health. In our experience, some institutions, and some lecturers within institutions, will bend over backwards to help people with a physical disability or with any other sort of non-mental disability. It can be a lot harder with mental health. My disability relates to mental health and, from my own experience, I know that it is hard to get people to understand how serious an issue it is.

A lot of people have problems reconciling mental health with the word "disability". That applies to students. If students have a mental health problem, they will just call it a problem. If someone is depressed, they will not necessarily think that they have a disability. There is a problem there on the student side. On the institution side, a lot of lecturers do not see mental health as being as important as other disabilities; they do not recognise it in the same way. That is quite bad.

Marlyn Glen: Apart from training, do you have any other suggestions for combating those attitudes?

Katy McCloskey: Not really—training is definitely what is needed at the moment. Attitudes can be bad among fellow students and work needs to be done to combat that. In one example, a student's mother asked for her child to be removed from a hall of residence because the person they were living with had severe epilepsy. Things like that are not fair.

With mainstreaming in education, I hope that the younger children who are being brought up now will learn to accept disability and will see going to school and attending higher education in a diverse environment as a positive thing. However, at the moment there is a problem with some students' attitude towards disability.

Gail Edwards: I support everything that Katy McCloskey has just said. The difference between the further and higher education sectors is marked. On lecturers' attitudes, in further education, lecturers with specialist skills might be invited in. For example, plumbers and joiners might come in from the trade. That group of lecturing staff can be overlooked when it comes to training. It is important to ensure that they are given some sort of awareness training, too.

The further education sector is moving towards having fully qualified lecturing staff. We entirely welcome that. The standards that are being encouraged include disability awareness training. The situation is improving and I hope that it will continue to do so through continuing professional development.

Scott Cuthbertson: Perhaps the Quality Assurance Agency could be brought in to evaluate teaching styles.

There is nothing better for disabled students than peer support. They benefit from having a forum in which they can share their experiences and good practice. That brings me on to the subject of positive role models, who provide an extremely good way of challenging discrimination. There are good examples of disabled people in sport, education and public life, and nothing beats a good role model for changing people's perceptions of disabilities.

Katy McCloskey: Training is fine, but it is not enough if people do not follow it through. As I said, there is not enough institutional focus or recognition of the need to make the necessary adjustments—not to do so is discrimination. People in higher education need to look at that long and hard. Lecturers can often be persistent offenders—not providing notes on time, not meeting students, rushing through overhead projections and not providing them in a large enough font. Institutions need to take such issues seriously. Not much is being done about it.

In my experience, the answer can be to pester constantly at the end of every lecture for the first four weeks, pointing out the things that the lecturer is meant to be doing, but is not doing. However, when they are still not done, people may feel as if nothing can be done about the situation. Institutions do not take the problems seriously and, in my experience, will not do anything about lecturers who do not carry out reasonable adjustments.

It can be very hard. Disabled students can end up almost apologising for what they are requesting. They feel that they are constantly pestering and that it is a constant fight or struggle. People's DSA can be late; their equipment might not have arrived; they have not had the training that they are meant to have had; it is week 4, and they might not have any notes because they have not been provided. People may feel as if everything is against them. Then, they start to feel that it is their fault and get almost apologetic when it is the lecturers who should be making the adjustments anyway.

People in higher education need to start taking a harder line with people who fail to comply with the need to make adjustments. They need to start taking the issue seriously. It is not enough for someone to send an e-mail or for the head of department to give someone a wee slap on the wrist and to say, "Make sure you don't do that again." Things need to be taken seriously because the failure to make adjustments is discrimination even if people do not see it in that way. If it is persistent, it can be enough to make people fail a year of their course. That is what happened to me.

Marlyn Glen: On a lighter note, but still on college life, do your members have the same opportunities to participate in student life, for example by joining a union or other society, working part time or socialising?

Scott Cuthbertson: Earlier, I talked briefly about the important role that outside life plays in education. We are aware that the current funding models do not take into account students' life outside education. They need to start doing that. They do not support additional activities or enable disabled students to go along to join clubs and societies. That creates a barrier between disabled students and their fellow students that it is not always possible for people to overcome. First, we need to consider developing an assessment model in which outside activities play a key role. Then we need to ensure that all college and university facilities are accessible, including students associations, sports fields and other facilities around the campus. A student's outside life plays a fundamental part in their life as a student, so we must ensure that disabled students can play as full a part as possible in that side of things.

Katy McCloskey: For students who receive benefits, working and even volunteering can be a challenge and a concern, particularly if they receive benefits because of a mental health problem. They are constantly worried about whether they can volunteer, whether that will be seen as evidence of their ability to work and whether their money will be taken off them. That can be quite a trial, and the same applies to part-time work.

I suffer from mental health problems and in my experience, when I was in receipt of benefits, some weeks were better than others. In some weeks, I probably could have worked, perhaps for four or five hours, getting people to fill out questionnaires or doing something minimal and low key, but I could not have done that because my money would have been taken off me. There is not enough flexibility.

There is also a problem for students who are doing vocational courses. I studied journalism and I wanted the chance to go out and do work experience to see whether it was the career that I wanted and what part of it I wanted to take up when I left university, but I could not do that because I thought that I would lose my benefits if I was seen to be working for a week, even if I was not being paid.

In students associations and student life in general, not enough is done to encourage students to get involved and to volunteer more. That is often because of physical accessibility and the nature of students associations—student officers change every year or every second year and there is not always a constant. Also, I do not think that there is enough funding to encourage disabled students to get involved in student life.

Just the other day, a blind student came to see me. Before he was blind, he owned a boat and was an active sailor. He still has his boat and he wants to continue sailing. He went along to the sailing club in the students association and they were stumped. They thought, "What do we do with him? Should we take him out in the boat?" They only had enough money to take a boat out once a week to practise for the cup that they were going for. They would need funding to be able to take that student out on the boat, because they could not afford to do so.

Funding needs to be made available to students associations to encourage and to pay for disabled students to get involved in activities and to volunteer. I certainly do not think that there are any negative attitudes. People are willing to get people involved in their activities. I know that I have always strived to do that within my students association, but sometimes there can be a financial barrier.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Are you content that your members know where to go to access information about the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and the rights that the legislation provides?

10:45

Scott Cuthbertson: The short answer to that is no. Much more work needs to be done through students associations, colleges and universities to get information about legislation out there in the public domain. Perhaps such information should even be built into the school leavers' programme or inductions, which Katy McCloskey mentioned earlier, to ensure that it gets out there. We must remember that a lot of legislation out there, on sexual orientation, disability, race and gender, covers students. Students must be able to digest information easily and know where to go if they require further information.

Another way of disseminating information is to encourage the use of disabled students forums in which students can get together and talk about issues that are relevant to them. That already happens at Aberdeen College and the University of Stirling. Colleges and universities should be encouraged to take part in such forums and to send along staff members who know about the appropriate legislation. We believe that information is not getting out there in the way that it should.

Katy McCloskey: Students who are reluctant to push for what they require or who are always apologetic and say things such as, "I'm really sorry, but can you give me notes?" need to be equipped with knowledge about their rights and to know that what they need to be given to continue their education is not being provided. They need to know that it is wrong that something is not being provided and why they should—rather than could—ask for things.

However, students should not be overburdened with information before they go to university, as that might put them off. As I said, induction at university can be quite a traumatic experience, especially for students who must apply for the DSA. I am slightly worried that equipping all students with a copy of the DDA on their first day might be a bit off-putting and might have negative connotations. It might send out the negative message: "Be prepared for the fight. You need to know your rights and about every part of the system so that you can keep on pestering and asking." That concerns me. If students are told on day one that they will not receive what they are entitled to receive, what image of the university will that project? How encouraging will that be for students in the first couple of weeks, which are already daunting? We must be careful to achieve a balance. Students must be equipped by knowing about their rights but not put off and made scared before they even start their studies.

Students will realise when they start their courses that they can be quite a struggle and a fight. Sometimes they would not start or continue their course if they knew how bad it was going to be. Therefore, we do not want students to be made too concerned at the start of their course. However, they must know where to go to find out about their rights and they need to be given a brief summary of those rights, but they certainly should not be equipped with the whole hog.

Nora Radcliffe: So you do not think that people would have more confidence about being more assertive if they thought that they had legislative back-up.

Katy McCloskey: Students who are hesitant and apologetic need to be more assertive. I was hesitant and apologetic, but I started to say to people, "Right. These are my rights and I'm not going to go away until you give me the notes." I can be quite pushy, but I have met plenty of disabled students in my five years in education who are not assertive. The number of books and statutes that are thrown at them will make no difference. Some people simply do not like to push, ask and pester because they are not comfortable doing so. We are not talking about only one lecture—there could be five or six lectures a week. There can be a lot of work and trawling. After a student has pushed and pestered a few times and is not getting anywhere, they can say to themselves, "What's the point? Everything is against me." As I said, if equipment is late, the DSA does not come on time and students cannot deal with their lecturers, they might simply want to leave in the second or third week as a result of all the stress. A fine balance needs to be struck.

Nora Radcliffe: So is there more of a role for students organisations such as the National Union of Students Scotland and the Coalition of Higher Education Students in Scotland, which you represent? Are you discharging a role on behalf of your members?

Katy McCloskey: As I said, we need to campaign to make students aware of their rights, but the issue must also be addressed by the institutions, which must back up such a campaign. When students are told about their rights, they should go to the institution and people should not have to keep on telling them that there is a positive feeling about disabilities in institutions, that lecturers are encouraged to meet requirements, and that disability services are fully funded and are given all the staff and resources that they need to follow things through. Students frequently do nothing and suffer in silence or tell a fellow student to accompany them and ask for more assistance.

Disability services in universities sometimes act as advocates to ask why something is not happening, which can sometimes prove to be worthwhile, because lecturers will sometimes listen a little more if a fellow university staff member rather than a students association representative or student provides information. However, such an approach can be time consuming for disability services, particularly at the start of the year, when they are working on DSA applications. Sometimes, disability services have to cope with 800 students with disabilities, and those are only the students who have disclosed their disability.

Members can imagine how time consuming it can be for staff members to have to push and pester constantly to have the needs and requirements of their students met. In the case of mental health, people need to be equipped with their rights, even if they are hesitant and reluctant. As I have said, some institutions and lecturers do not view that as a disability or take it seriously enough.

Scott Cuthbertson: There is a role for the NUS in the dissemination of students' rights. We do that day in, day out with students who come to us. Dissemination should be not just for students but for college and university lecturers and staff. Instead of students having to point out their right to have courses made accessible to them, college and university staff and lecturers should know what they must do to make courses accessible.

Parliament also has a role to play in the dissemination of information about students' rights. It should engage disabled students in the parliamentary process. It should encourage disabled students to learn about the legislation that is being proposed. I know that the committee has already done much work, for which I commend it. There is a wider role to be played by the NUS, colleges and Parliament.

Gail Edwards: Students associations in universities are generally well funded and are able to provide specific people to support students with disabilities. However, the situation is different in the FE sector. Some colleges do not provide enough resources and, in turn, the students associations are not able to provide services to students. There is a missing link in the chain in that sector.

Nora Radcliffe: Is there sufficient accessible accommodation for students in further and higher education?

Scott Cuthbertson: The view in the NUS is that disabled students will end up living with other disabled students. There will be one accessible complex or flat provided by a university or college. The student experience will be based on that. That ghettoises the issue. All student accommodation should be accessible in one way or another. We are not saying that there should be wheelchair accessible bedrooms in every flat. However, there should be more wheelchair and disabled person accessible accommodation so that disabled students can mix with the general student population and make friends like everyone else. Why should they miss out on the home life of any other student?

Integration of disabled students needs to be promoted, but to do that there needs to be relevant support, particularly for colleges that receive their moneys in different ways from universities. We need to ensure that the support is available for colleges to develop accessible housing for disabled students.

Katy McCloskey: I agree that there needs to be more accessible housing for disabled students. In my experience, only a specific floor is accessible for disabled students. It can be unfair for disabled students to be thrown in with other disabled students just because they have a disability, so that they cannot experience student life with other students. Some institutions that I have spoke to—I have a note about the University of Dundee—point out that there is accessible accommodation. However, often it is not where students want it to be. For example, they are given self-catering accommodation when they want catered accommodation. In other cases, it is not accessible or additional rooms are not provided for personal assistants, which can be a problem. Institutions that are building new student halls of residence are beginning to have a spread-out approach, in that there will several accessible rooms in each building. New buildings are okay but the older ones pose a problem.

Gail Edwards: Many students who attend universities away from home choose to move to private housing after one or two years in student accommodation. Public policy should provide an impetus to private landlords to make their properties as accessible as possible. That can be difficult in places such as Edinburgh, where wheelchair access is a particular problem, but we need some recognition that students should have the choice, irrespective of their needs. Private housing stock is not adequate for many students.

Ms White: Should there be a residential college in Scotland?

Katy McCloskey: I represent the Coalition of Higher Education Students in Scotland, so I cannot speak for initiatives in further education. However, I would not like higher and further education to be let off the hook by a system in which the sectors did not have to bother making their institutions accessible because all disabled students could attend a residential college. We should be careful not to encourage such an attitude.

Scott Cuthbertson: We would welcome a residential college in Scotland, but we are concerned that it might be set up in such a way as to be regarded as a special school. We hope that the approach that was taken would prevent such an attitude from developing. Residential colleges or schools should be open and accessible not just to disabled students but to all students. Perhaps the issue is less about considering a single residential college than it is about ensuring that all colleges extend their provision for students who have disabilities and complex needs.

Ms White: I asked about a residential college because the matter was raised in 2005. Some students think that they are at a disadvantage because there is no residential college.

Scott Cuthbertson: Residential colleges can certainly run specialist courses that other colleges might not be able to offer. There are advantages and disadvantages to residential colleges, which must be carefully considered.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for giving evidence. You have given us helpful answers to our many questions. Please tell us—very briefly—if we have missed any aspects of the barriers that students face that we should include in our report.

If there are no further comments, I suspend the meeting for five minutes, to allow a changeover of witnesses.

10:57

Meeting suspended.

11:04

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome the next panel of witnesses. Lorna Caldwell, Leia Fitzgerald and Alan Scott are from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland—I am sorry, I am getting ahead of myself. I was too busy looking at the clock.

I will start again. I welcome Miki Quigley from Cumbernauld College, Dr Jenny Rees from Glasgow Caledonian University, Ruth Hendery from Jewel and Esk Valley College and Anne Simpson from the University of Strathclyde. We will start immediately with questions, as we did with the previous panel—I might even find the right list of questions.

The first questions deal with strategic leadership. How do you ensure that provision for disabled students is mainstreamed into the services that you provide?

Dr Jenny Rees (Glasgow Caledonian University): I will answer that question, but I start by making a personal declaration. I happen also to be a member of the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, but that is not the capacity in which I am here; I am here as a member of Glasgow Caledonian University's senior staff.

The essence of strategic leadership is to put in place a structure at the top, so Glasgow Caledonian University has an equality and diversity group that is chaired by the university principal and vice chancellor. That is a statement of the importance that is placed on equalities, including proper treatment of students who have disabilities.

Below that, all the appropriate support services need to be in place. As you have heard loudly and strongly from the students, it is also important that equality cascades across the university to all the university's staff. We have strategies and policies in place to ensure not only that we comply with the legislation, which we clearly must do, but that we comply with the spirit of it and move ahead of it in providing a proper and responsive service for our students. The key is not the policies and strategies, but their implementation.

Ruth Hendery (Jewel and Esk Valley College): Colleges have a broadly similar structure. Jewel and Esk Valley College has an equality and diversity group that is chaired by the college principal. Beneath that, there is an infrastructure of posts and service providers that support disabled students and others who experience barriers to learning.

Miki Quigley (Cumbernauld College): I endorse those comments. They reflect what further education colleges provide.

Anne Simpson (University of Strathclyde): Similarly, the University of Strathclyde's disability advisory group is chaired by the deputy principal. As the head of the disability service, I have regular access to that person—we have monthly meetings. The deputy principal takes a considerable interest in the issues and reports to the university management group to ensure that people at that level are well aware of the issues.

The mainstreaming of disability into services must incorporate the idea that, under part IV of the DDA, teaching is a service. It can be a bit of an alien concept to university staff that, when they set exams, arrange field trips or organise placements, they are providing students with services, so it is an immense challenge for higher education to ensure that disability issues are embedded at that level. The occasions on which something goes wrong are less about malice and ill will—although there might be isolated pockets of those, as there might be anywhere—and more about lack of knowledge and understanding of how, in discharging their institutional role, whatever it is, every individual ought to acknowledge disabled students' needs. I agree that that requires strategic leadership, but it also requires a programme of staff development and awareness so that everyone understands the issues that are appropriate to what they do.

Ruth Hendery: Such a programme must include everyone who works in the organisation. The Scottish Further Education Unit and other voluntary organisations have come to Jewel and Esk Valley College to run training on disabilities. That training, which was originally specifically on the DDA but has latterly covered equality and diversity issues, is mandatory for all staff in all positions throughout the organisation. We are trying to effect a culture change, so the training must involve everybody.

The Convener: Are you happy that there is a top-down structure? Policy decisions do not always get through to all the staff who are involved.

Miki Quigley: We are very happy. Often, people who hold key posts in further education colleges, such as student services managers, are responsible and directly accountable to a member of the senior management team, if not the principal himself. It is a two-way process, so both sides are clearly aware of the issues and resolutions.

Dr Rees: We must ensure that resources follow the strategy. A considerable amount of money has been spent on accessibility, including making adjustments and modifications to existing buildings and estate, and ensuring that principles of accessibility are built into the design of new buildings. I am not talking only about accessibility for wheelchairs but about, for example, lifts that talk so that people know what floor they are on, improved signage and colour contrast within buildings. Important investment has been made in such things.

Of course, the provision for students with disabilities is person-to-person provision, but it has to be embedded in an accessible estate. Earlier we heard about student accommodation. At my university, the student accommodation happens to be adjacent to the campus—just a road away—which is excellent. The accommodation includes specially adjusted rooms for students who have disabilities. Those rooms are not all in one block but are distributed. We have made investments of that kind, as well as investments in central support and staff training.

Anne Simpson: I do not want to start talking about funding if we will do so later—

The Convener: We will.

Anne Simpson: I will take up Jenny Rees's point. At the University of Strathclyde, we have a disability resource development fund, which allows the deputy principal to encourage academic and other departments to think about how they can promote the accessibility of provision, and to think about refurbishment of desks, of computer hardware and software, and so on. Departments can apply to that fund, which has been created with part of premium funding. The aim is not only to improve provision but to increase awareness of existing provision.

The Convener: Earlier, we heard a lot about careers advice. How do you work with young disabled people at school to prepare them for college and university?

Dr Rees: Universities are there for everybody who is able to benefit from a university education. If people happen to have a disability, that is merely an additional factor that we have to take into account. As we heard in the eloquent evidence of previous witnesses, coming to university is a confusing process for all students, who have to work out what they want to study and where. The sort of advice that we offer would apply to all students. Most obviously, we advise them to read our materials on prospectuses and to come to visit the campus to speak to the staff. That is more important for students with disabilities. We advise them to make early contact to find out whether their particular needs can be met and whether their chosen programme is appropriate and will be one that they can cope with and enjoy. Like any other student, a disabled student has to be able to make well-informed choices.

Anne Simpson: I would add a couple of points to the picture that Jenny has sketched. At whatever stage students find themselves in their education or careers, we welcome their coming to the university to find out more about what is available. In addition, when we offer disabled applicants places on courses, the disability service automatically gets in touch with them so that preparations can be made.

We hear anecdotally that some disabled students are ill-informed at school. For example, they might be told not to do a course if they have dyslexia because it would not be appropriate. Clearly, we have to challenge such assumptions. We work closely with the schools and colleges liaison service at the University of Strathclyde. When it is doing the rounds of schools and providing information for all pupils, it also provides information about the support that is available for disabled students.

We also invite school teachers who are in a guidance relationship with pupils who are thinking about coming to university to meet support staff in the disability service and disabled students to get information about services and about why people ought to challenge the traditional assumptions about the types of courses that people who suffer from impairments can do. We want to continue and develop that.

11:15

Dr Rees: I want to reinforce an important point about role models. Several current programmes involve the use of role models—in the west of Scotland, we have the GOALS—greater opportunity for access and learning in schools—initiative, which is a major initiative to encourage to come to university people from a range of schools that have not traditionally sent people there, including schools that have pupils with disabilities. The programme involves the use of students as mentors and role models, including students who have disabilities. My university has the FE/HE articulation project, which has a disability strand that is aligned with a mentoring strand. Students who come to university from college after completing a higher national certificate or diploma can receive support from a student mentor. Interestingly, several of the group who have volunteered to act as mentors are students who have disabilities. That is crucial, because people think, "If they can do it, so can I."

Ruth Hendery: There are fairly well-worn tracks from special schools into special programmes in colleges, which are often facilitated by careers advisers, but there is sometimes a danger that expectations become fixed. However, applications to colleges from schools careers teams and guidance staff are increasingly for courses that offer a bridge into mainstream courses, as a foretaste of full college life. People think that they might apply for a mainstream course a year down the line. Careers teams certainly help to smooth the transition for young people from schools.

We also have significant numbers of students with disabilities who do not come from school and who face other barriers to learning because of that. For adults who have fallen out of contact with the careers service, there are additional barriers to finding out exactly what is going on. We try hard in our literature and publicity, and through word of mouth in working with intermediary agencies, to advise people to have a look or to do a taster course and to meet the learning support and student services teams to talk through issues in the year before the one in which they want to come to college. The aim is to get a package of support ready when students arrive to do their course and, as has been said, to get students on the right course at the right level with the outcomes that they want.

Miki Quigley: Ruth Hendery mentioned adults who self-refer or who do not come directly from a school, where people are more directly supported by careers advisers. We used to have specialist careers officers but, by design, they have now more or less disappeared. It is interesting that the NUS witness referred to students who have special needs feeling that they are not fully supported by careers advisers because their skills and knowledge of issues such as courses, entry requirements and exit routes have become too generic. We may need to reconsider that situation. Careers officers who have much more specialist knowledge of special needs issues may have a role to play in meeting individuals' needs.

Ruth Hendery: The careers service has had Beattie funding to provide transition workers, but that funding is coming to a conclusion and some of those workers will no longer be in post. They made a contribution for some people by tackling many of the issues and difficulties and by making the transition from school to college more straightforward.

Nora Radcliffe: We have heard in evidence that disclosing disability is a complex issue and that, if students are to disclose, that should happen only once, to a disability adviser. How do you manage disclosure?

Anne Simpson: I will pick up on a point that Katy McCloskey and others made—I note that underdisclosure in relation to mental health is a significant concern and needs to be worked on. What a student discloses and what it is appropriate to pass on from that must be unpicked carefully. At the University of Strathclyde, the evidence about a student's impairment is held in the disability service. What is disclosed thereafter to academic and other colleagues is the likely impact of a student's impairment on his or her studies. The impairment is not named unless the student makes it explicit that they want that to be available. The label is unhelpful, because what someone who has a visual or hearing impairment requires in higher education is so wide open that it must be interpreted.

We convey the likely impact on study and the recommended reasonable adjustments. Given that every member of academic staff is responsible for making adjustments, and given the relative remoteness of the disability service from the details of what is required on a placement or in a laboratory, for example, academic staff need to be part of the discussion about adjustments and to accept ownership of their appropriateness within the constraints of their academic discipline.

Any student may develop a disability in higher education and make a fresh disclosure to a member of staff other than one in the disability service, so we provide staff with guidance on how to react to that. Our number 1 piece of advice is that they should ask, "How can I help?" In some ways, bureaucracy is in danger of getting in the way of a good old-fashioned dialogue. It must be recommended that staff should try to encourage people to retain common sense and to ask students what they can do to help them.

Dr Rees: We want students to disclose information for two reasons. The first, as Anne Simpson said, is to ensure that the support that students need is in place. If a student in a university does six separate modules in a year, that student will deal with six, or probably more, members academic staff. We take the approach that Anne Simpson described; we ensure that the support that a student needs—the additional time in examinations or whatever—is made known to the people who can ensure that it happens.

The second reason points the other way—it is to ensure that students are aware of the disabled students allowance and are helped to prepare an application for it. It is difficult enough for people to find out everything about university and the bursary support to which they are entitled, without adding to that the need to find out about the further support that is appropriate for people who have disabilities. There is a role for the centre in advising students and in helping them to prepare a DSA bid.

Ruth Hendery: One key requirement is to provide enough information and staff when the student wants access to them. We are busy saying proactively that all the support services exist and that they are easy to find, and we are giving students lists of names and faces but, sometimes, students are overwhelmed at the beginning. When they arrive in college and are simply looking at what is going on, they have a great deal to absorb in the early stages.

However, every student is part of a student group with a class tutor, who meets every one of his or her students in the first three weeks. That one-to-one interview is guaranteed.

Perhaps a student might not have the confidence to ask for support, might not have been informed that support is available or simply might not have made the connection with the support that they might have required in their earlier studies at school or wherever. Indeed, they might have been studying outwith the school setting and did not know that they really needed such support. After attending enough lectures, students will recognise that they need support, at which point someone will be able to ask whether they can do something for them.

As other witnesses have said, dialogue is important. It is to be hoped that students will find someone to trust and become familiar with, who will talk them through things and show them that help is available. The point is that we should hand disabled students on person to person. The issue is not necessarily about disclosing the whys and wherefores of the need for support, but about the support that can be offered. Most students, if they have received support in the past, will be only too happy to say, "I now see that I really need X, Y and Z". At that point, such support can be put in place.

Miki Quigley: Many colleges, not just my own, are finding more and more that students who had not declared anything at the beginning of the course are self-referring later on to an extended learning support manager or to a tutor who is responsible for delivering support services. I hope—indeed, I believe—that, even at that later point we see to students' needs and give them the same responsive support that we give to students who follow the usual process of referral through a guidance tutor or through a declaration on an enrolment form. We do not demand that they go back and follow the proper processes; we simply respond to the need that is presented to us at the time.

We genuinely care about meeting our students' needs and giving them emotional support because we realise that it is difficult for them to pluck up the courage to go through the process, particularly if they have not declared their disability at the beginning of the course. Their having to declare it later simply represents another, bigger hurdle.

Nora Radcliffe: I realise that we have covered a number of points about careers advice and the transitions between previous existence and college or university. We have heard that disabled students find it particularly useful to have an early start because that allows them to deal with matters such as test-support provision in order that they can orient themselves on the campus and ensure that services are in place for them. How do you provide those kinds of opportunities for disabled students?

Dr Rees: The simple answer is that such opportunities are important and are available to students. Students are positively advised to try out the campus—perhaps when it is a bit quieter—and see how it works. In any case, students certainly receive encouragement and support in that respect.

The key point is to think ahead. Of course, to suggest that any student should think ahead is always a counsel of perfection, but they should try to do so.

Nora Radcliffe: Does the timetable for applying for and being accepted on a course contain constraints? For example, someone said earlier that things start to swing into place when a course is offered. Are there constraints in respect of when students apply and when they are accepted that make it difficult to pick disabled students out of the thousands of people who apply, and to get provision in place to give them an early opportunity to experience campus life?

Dr Rees: Ideally, a student should apply through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service by 15 January and, if they have ticked a particular box on the form, we respond immediately to find out their needs.

That said, we are not always faced with ideal situations. Some students do not get their qualifications or have not thought that far ahead about university, and other students are offered a place only in the summer. However, given that exam results come out in early August, there is still time before classes begin in September for students to visit the campus and to speak to the people with whom they will work.

Ruth Hendery: Colleges face more of a problem in that respect because they often receive applications significantly later. We have arrangements with the careers service to deal with young people who have learning difficulties and who might well come from supported units in mainstream schools or from special schools. In order to prepare them for moving on, those young people might, for example, take link courses at college. In fact, in the city, students can take link courses at two or three colleges, after which they will be asked to make a decision. The courses are vital in allowing students to get a feel for college life and to see what they like about it. Those courses also indicate to students the skills that it would be useful for them to acquire in their leaving year.

11:30

We work with schools under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, but there is more to be done. A student might have complex needs, but often it is May before they have made a decision and been accepted on a college course. The wheels in other organisations turn even more slowly, although I would not say that ours are fast.

It is sometimes tricky to access funding streams if, for example, health provision needs to be put in place to support a student's time in college. Transport and social work are the biggest problems, but the Executive's "Partnership Matters: A Guide to Local Authorities, NHS Boards and Voluntary Organisations on Supporting Students with Additional Needs in Further Education" is bedding in and partnerships are beginning to become more proactive. We know roughly that the school leavers who as pupils needed support for transport or health issues while they were at school are likely to continue to need such support and we are getting better at making sure that such elements of the support package are prepared earlier. That does not mean that the system is perfect, but we are working on it and "Partnership Matters" is certainly encouraging better collaboration between agencies.

Sometimes, it is the practicalities that cause difficulties. We can offer places at colleges, but the provision of support depends on budgets and the priorities of other agencies. Ultimately, that can mean that a student might not be able to take up his or her place.

Miki Quigley: I concur with everything that Ruth Hendery said. I have nothing to add.

Anne Simpson: Students know that they can go to university when they get their higher results in August and there is sometimes considerable pressure at that time to make sure that the right arrangements for the transition are made. When a student requires funding support for independent living, the social work department that is responsible for the student might need to be encouraged to come up with the direct payments that will enable them to live independently in halls. Previously, if the parent was the carer, the arrangements would have been straightforward, but if the student wishes to stay in halls, persuasion has to come into force to make sure that that is financially possible. I have seen problems in that area.

We need to be wary of disabled students coming to universities, meeting people from the disability service and forming an impression of the institution based on that service. When that happens, it is a great pity. I prefer information about the institution—and acclimatisation to the institution—to be in the hands of the academic department in which the student intends to study. We have used summer access courses as a way of allowing disabled students to try out arrangements. For example, a deaf student who wanted to study maths tried out SpeedText and found that it was not particularly useful in that context. The difficulty in the summer is with providing a meaningful context in which students can assess their support requirements in a lecture-type situation, but some access courses provide that opportunity.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): What physical mechanisms are in place to support disabled students?

Dr Rees: Will you clarify what you mean by "physical mechanisms"?

Mr McGrigor: Practical mechanisms, then.

Dr Rees: My university has an arrangement that is not dissimilar to that of the University of Strathclyde. We have a central disability team of disability advisers and we have disability co-ordinators in each of the eight academic schools. They are members of the academic staff, so their role as disability co-ordinator is one of their duties. We also have the normal provision to staff of equalities and disability awareness training. That provides the human link and the human contact, particularly once the student has disclosed what their needs are. We hope that that will enable their needs to be met.

We house a lot of support in our newly opened Saltire centre, which is our learning centre. For example, all the computers are equipped with software that allows students to enlarge the text size, and there are specialist areas that have other pieces of software for students with visual impairments and quiet areas for students with hearing impairments. Anne Simpson talked about the teachability initiative, which is an example of one of the strengths of what has been going on in Scottish higher education and has encouraged people on every programme in the university to reflect on how they teach. That ensures that special provision is not required because the standard provision is good enough. For example, handouts could always be provided in 14-point Arial font, which is much more accessible to a lot of people with visual impairments and can be read by other people. Such initiatives will avoid the constant chipping away—with people having to say, "I need this," and, "I want that"—that Katy McCloskey talked about earlier.

I am sure that Anne Simpson can talk more eloquently about teachability than I can.

Anne Simpson: I could go on for a long time but perhaps the committee does not want me to. The project has been successful. It attempts to make sense of the complexity of the issues around meeting the needs of disabled students in an academic context. For example, the person who is teaching next week's seminar ought to be aware of the potential issues for any disabled students, and the person who is organising placements, preparing field trips or setting exams needs to think about the accessibility of arrangements. Getting to a situation in which disabled students are not people for whom adjustments have to be made but people for whom routine provision is more often right than not is the desirable social model of disability. One way of regarding teachability is as an attempt to apply the social model of disability to higher education by asking what makes education accessible and what gets in the way of students making use of a lecture.

It is always encouraging to hear someone say, as Jenny Rees said in relation to Glasgow Caledonian University, that there is an expectation that all departments in a university will use teachability to review the accessibility of the curriculum. Engagement is, nevertheless, patchy throughout higher education in Scotland. That is not for the want of effort on the part of team members from the University of Strathclyde, who have travelled around to promote the idea. We have to recognise the size of the undertaking. We are trying to bring the issue into the consciousness of each and every member of staff in relation to their teaching role in an institution.

Ruth Hendery: In colleges, the infrastructure reflects much of that activity. Most colleges have a central student services team that picks up on a broad range of general issues that are of concern to all students. However, the team will include people with experience of working in the field of disability.

On the issue of the academic progress of students—which includes issues such as course choice, assessment of need and academic support—most colleges have a team that would be identified as learning support. Students on mainstream courses who access quite a lot of learning support would get the extended learning support funding that we have talked about. In such cases, support could take almost any form. We have many students who simply say, "I know where to find you if I need you"—that is as much as they want. Perhaps they have overlays that they receive from staff or particular pieces of access technology that enable them to get properly set up and to go off to their classes.

Other students attend weekly individual tutorials, which can have much to do with keeping the student on course, on task and sorted in relation to the practicalities of learning in a context in which the student might have to deal with a pile of outside issues. Such tutorial support from a learning support tutor can enable students to focus on learning.

There are many ways of delivering support. We try hard not to extract people from classes so that we can work with them, so we devote a lot of staff time to supporting whole-class teaching. The basis of that approach, which I think is common in colleges, is the screening of students when they arrive, to ascertain their literacy and numeracy skills. If we discover that a high number of students in a class seem not to have the necessary literacy or numeracy skills for the course for which they have signed up—if a particular level of literacy or numeracy has not been spelled out in the course requirements—we can put learning support staff into the class, particularly when core skills are being developed. The college regards the core skills initiative as a way of including all students, particularly those who have not had positive experiences of learning to read, write and count.

Additional input through whole-class support is one model of support. We also offer additional top-up classes or drop-in tutorials for students, on a flexible basis as and when such support is required. Teaching faculties can say to us, "This unit has particularly hard parts; please give us a hand to help the students to get through them." The approach is inclusive and helps not just students with disabilities but a wide range of students who need support for whatever reason. Because the staff in learning support teams are academics, they can liaise and negotiate with other academic staff and can act as go-betweens between students and staff. The learning support team often provides in-house training for class tutors who are day-to-day lecturers in their subject. The infrastructure exists to enable us to train all our staff to be more supportive.

Through the QELTM project, which was mentioned earlier, we are taking a hard look at how the curriculum is put together and at the accessibility of teaching materials and approaches. Learning support teams assist in that regard, because in many colleges the number of students is such that it is possible to employ learning support staff who are specialists in visual or hearing impairment or in physical disability. Of course, more students might have mental health problems or unseen disabling conditions, but there is usually a huge body of experience in a college's learning support team.

Miki Quigley: I seem to be in the excellent position of being fourth in the line of witnesses, which gives me the opportunity to concur with everything that my colleagues say. I want to add just one point, about which I am enthusiastic. I presume that most colleges are like Cumbernauld College, in that they have effective and efficient estates management teams. Such teams are transforming the physical institutions in Scotland and making them accessible, inclusive and—on the whole—pleasant, comfortable and responsive environments in which to study and work. We are moving much more quickly towards achieving those standards throughout the further education sector and I congratulate estates managers on their achievements.

Mr McGrigor: How is the support that witnesses described monitored and evaluated to ensure that it achieves its aims?

The Convener: We should start with Miki Quigley this time.

11:45

Miki Quigley: We monitor and evaluate support in a variety of ways and we involve the students themselves in the process. In Cumbernauld College, students have ownership of their personal learning log. At various times during the academic year, students reflect on and evaluate their learning progression and the support mechanisms that the college has put in place. Students can do that by themselves or with support and input from their guidance tutors. They are asked to give both an evaluation and their view of whether they feel that the support is right and is allowing them to progress towards their predetermined goals or whether they have changed their goals as they have moved along.

In that process, they are also invited to reflect on the college's provision. For example, they are asked whether a named person in the organisation has worked alongside them to identify changing requirements such as specialist adaptions or the adoption of particular teaching and learning approaches. The student is central to that process—they reflect on what has happened to them and on what progress has been made.

Built into the structure of the faculties and the course teaching teams are points in the year at which, through a course audit or evaluation, we, too, consider the outcomes, not just for disabled students, but for all students. We ask all students whether our provision is what they expect and require of us. As professionals, we discuss among our peers—especially in what we call the core teams—the outcomes for students and assess whether we have met our retention and achievement targets. As part of our audit of the resources that we have purchased, we identify whether we have used all those resources. We do not have cupboards full of resources that are labelled as having been used today or last week; we endeavour to use as wide a range of resources as possible as often as possible. The process of auditing those resources helps to give us a flavour of what is being used and for what purpose, which in turn feeds into the information that—

Ruth Hendery: Informally, we have self-evaluation, which is the quality control mechanism through which all the teams—the academic teams, the learning support team and the guidance team—are obliged to evaluate their own processes and services. As Miki Quigley said, central to that is what the student thought about the service that they got. That is part of the process. In addition, when Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education comes in every four years, it drills down and examines all the data and evidence. As members know, we publish information about the performance of the different teams and the extent to which they are considered to be doing the jobs that they are paid to do.

Mr McGrigor: From what I have seen of the written evidence, it appears that the students are satisfied.

Ruth Hendery: That is what comes out in the college audits.

Dr Rees: That is right. The simple answer to Mr McGrigor's initial question is that we ask the students themselves. It is pleasing and encouraging that the various studies that we do suggest that many disabled students are happy. However, it clear that the committee has heard of cases in which they are not yet fully satisfied, so there is still work to be done.

As an institution, we also do other things, such as monitoring the percentage of students at the university who have disabilities. That tells us that we are still somewhat below the level that we would expect to be at, which makes us wonder whether we need to be more proactive in encouraging students who have disabilities to come to study at our institution. Looking at the issue from the other angle, we also monitor how disabled students progress through the university. For example, although the number of disabled students is very small, relatively speaking, the proportion of them who get a first-class, or an upper second-class, honours degree at the university is the same as the proportion of the total student group who get those results, which we take as a good measure.

Anne Simpson: A certain amount of monitoring is done by the disability service. Through the Pegasus staff-student information system, disabled students are asked whether the necessary adjustments have been made in their exams and in the classroom teaching that they receive. For the most part, the feedback is positive, but one should not be complacent, as there are examples of disabled students not getting what they require when they require it. We ought to do better and to consider how we can do so.

The positive duty to promote equality for disabled people will ensure that all of us consider retention and progression more carefully and cast a critical eye over the statistics on the performance of disabled students in comparison with that of students who are not disabled. We leave some of the responsibility for monitoring and evaluation to departmental disability contacts. Jenny Rees outlined such a scheme. At the University of Strathclyde, there are some 60 academic departmental disability contacts, who have the formal role of monitoring the effectiveness of the arrangements for disabled students.

The Convener: Are you happy, Jamie?

Mr McGrigor: Very.

Marilyn Livingstone: When the committee held consultation events across Scotland, a recurring issue concerned the relevance of courses and how meaningful they were in relation to what students wanted to achieve. We heard that some students experienced a revolving-door situation: they went from one course to another and so on. What can providers do to ensure that students have sufficient choice and that courses are as relevant as possible?

Miki Quigley: I am conscious that often the information given by witnesses does not include students with general learning disability. There is a tendency for us to focus on physical and unseen disabilities, but we need to be clear that we are also talking about students with general learning disabilities. I will answer your question in relation to those students.

We can take some comfort from the fact that many staff in FE colleges have a lifelong career in teaching and have been around a long time. We have developed a great breadth and depth of knowledge in an area that we have worked in for our entire careers. We do not change subjects or departments frequently and we tend to work with similar student groups. For example, I work mostly with students who have general learning disabilities. Between us, myself and my colleagues have decades of experience. That is not to say that we are in a rut or dyed-in-the-wool teachers who are not professionally progressive and unable to change, but we bring a lot of experience to the job and have a great depth of knowledge of the needs, interests and aspirations of our particular clients.

We also work in collaboration with organisations such as Key Housing Association, Enable Scotland and Quarriers. We have been in partnership at the local level for a long time. I understand that the national initiative is emerging from the document "Partnerships Matter". However, we have had local partnerships for a long time, albeit in an unrecognised format, through which we have been able to devise courses that meet the needs and interests of both the student and their carer—by carer, I mean a student's family, referring agency or school.

When we ask students directly whether they are enjoying their course, we hope to be told yes. In Cumbernauld College, I also hope that they say yes when they are asked whether they were involved in selecting the content of their course. Our courses are not prescriptive. We hang a loose framework in subject content on to a title. However, on enrolment, and shortly thereafter, students as individuals or as a class group can influence the direction of the course and its content. They can make the course what they want and need it to be. A student's progress on their course is reviewed frequently throughout the year, with the involvement of the referring organisation or the student's family. There are many opportunities for students to identify the courses that they want to do and to ensure that we provide them.

Marilyn Livingstone: The criticisms that we heard had more to do with access courses for college entry or work. It was claimed that an individual could be on one course, then another and so on.

The Convener: It is also about the group 18 courses. People with learning difficulties in particular felt very frustrated that the courses were pretendy or that they did the same course year after year, but it led to nothing.

Marilyn Livingstone: In some cases, they had achieved their quota of courses and had to go on to a waiting list to get back into college. I assume that that was due to lack of places.

Ruth Hendery: We recognise that there is probably an issue there. I know that from my college and I have talked about it at the SFEU inclusion forum with colleagues from other colleges. We all know that there is a group of learners made up of adults who may have left the formal education system at 16, 17 or 18 and who may have reached a particular plateau or level in their upwards progression through the qualifications framework. We have always tried to provide a range of courses that allow them to develop their skills and interests and to learn in a lateral progression.

As the committee heard last week from Tom Drake, the SQA has endeavoured to provide more access level programmes. However, people have long lives, and social workers, referring agencies and families would like FE colleges to provide opportunities in education year upon year upon year, yet it is never made clear to us what the lifelong goal is. Every year I get phone calls asking me, "What classes have you got on a Tuesday afternoon because so-and-so has a gap?" That makes me think, "Hang on a minute," because we are increasingly clearly directed that we are here to provide vocational training—education and training for the world of work. However, if someone is not aiming for the world of work, whose responsibility is it to provide that tailor-made, individualised education? I do not believe that that responsibility falls just to FE colleges alone. We have a workplace co-ordinator, and those who are ready and prepared for work, such as our young school leavers, can get work placements and move into work. However, as we have tried to shift the emphasis in adult programmes towards developing core skills and getting people ready for work, we have found that there are a lot of adults who do not want to go on to work and who need to develop skills for everyday living.

Prior to the publication of "Partnership Matters", I was in dialogue with social workers who said that teaching people how to tie their shoelaces, to go on the bus or to manage in the cafeteria is not our job at all; perhaps that is the role of social workers. We still have some way to go to clarify the situation.

If we start with the student and what they need, want and are interested in, we are going to arrive at a package of programmes that will change during their life. However, who delivers those programmes? Where are they to be delivered? Is it appropriate to deliver such courses in a classroom if transferring the skills that the students learn into everyday life is another big hurdle? Perhaps such things should be learned in the community with a team of staff who can follow through into the home environment, wherever people live.

There are many issues surrounding education providers. We can only do so much, especially in a college such as ours that has lots of people signing up to become hairdressers, beauticians, joiners and plumbers. There is a real pressure on funding, so how do we make or keep space to educate people who do not want to enter the world of work?

Marilyn Livingstone: Thank you. That was the point that I wanted to be answered.

We have heard from a lot of learners that there should be more vocational courses that would support them into employment and develop their core skills. What are your views on that?

12:00

Ruth Hendery: We have a range of bridging programmes for school leavers who have additional support needs. That is not to say that they all have the same disability—some have many disabilities and some have challenging social and emotional issues. Whatever the reason, when those people come on the programmes, we are well aware that their main goal is to get out there into the world of work. They want to do what their peers are doing, and some of them would like to get out and work straight away; they do not want to study any more because they have not been particularly successful at school. We certainly have a selling job to do, as we have to say, "I'm sorry, but you really need to push up your literacy and numeracy skills. It's an investment, and you will need those skills."

We look hard at the whole field of employability and citizenship. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme is excellent: it gives students something interesting, builds up their skills in core areas and allows them to play a part in their local communities. Voluntary work is also good, because it may be the closest to open employment that some young people can achieve.

We certainly give young people the opportunity to do work placements. We have a workplace co-ordinator who can go out and negotiate with employers. Miki Quigley mentioned the huge wealth of experience that exists. If we put the wrong student in the wrong placement, so they are ill-prepared, they will experience failure and we could lose that employer as a placement provider. Therefore, work placements must be managed carefully and individually. That is resource intensive, but it is worth it, because a lot of student placements can—if that is what the student wants—turn into real-life work opportunities in the future, so it is hugely important.

The gap is between access 3 and intermediate level 1 courses in vocational areas, and I can give an example of where things can get fairly fraught. We have a lot of young people who come along and say that they would love to work with children, but because demand for child care courses is high and demand for accreditation for child carers is growing, the level at which child care courses are run has gone up. In practice, therefore, many child care courses, even at the bottom end, for the first stepping stone into training, are at intermediate level 1 or 2, which automatically excludes all the young people who simply have something to offer and would be great child care assistants if they were guided and steered. They could have real work capacity, but they are unlikely to be able to get into that training, simply because the gap has widened. Therefore, we must be ever so careful about what we encourage young people to consider doing. If we know that they are not going to get into training at intermediate level 1 or 2, there is little point in their doing a course that takes them only to access level 2.

Marilyn Livingstone: My next question is a wider question for all the witnesses. It is about flexibility, which was highlighted as a problem. We have heard about good practice today, but how can we ensure that good practice is rolled out so that there is flexibility and reasonable adjustments can be made?

Anne Simpson: Katy McCloskey highlighted something that is important in higher education. There must be encouragement to allow and support part-time study, even on courses that do not traditionally offer that. That additional flexibility is really helpful, and many disabled students could study more successfully if there was a part-time version of the course of their choice.

As Katy McCloskey said, the financial arrangements to support such courses must follow that desire for flexibility, but it is important not to jump to the conclusion that someone ought to consider the part-time route because they are disabled. If a disabled student wishes to study full time, support for that should, of course, be there, and the first line of advice would not necessarily be to encourage part-time study. However, when, for a reason related to a disability in conjunction with the course requirements, that is the best arrangement for a particular student, the financial background needs to be addressed. The fact that part-time students have access to a very limited student loan could be a serious disincentive to part-time study.

A disabled student may be unable to work part time in order to support themselves while they study, which is a route that may be open to a student who is not disabled. Although there are no hard-and-fast rules, the financial arrangements need to support the desire for flexibility in the pace of study. A lot of employment in later life can be part time, so why should a teacher education course, or whatever, not be offered to students as a part-time course?

Dr Rees: The issue has two dimensions. Internally, we all seek to be flexible and to make appropriate and reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of students with disabilities; indeed, the committee has heard about many ways in which we can do so. We could undoubtedly do better—for example, individual staff will sometimes not be as caring and thoughtful as we might want them to be—but if the student is kept at the core internally, we will get things right. We should ask students, "What is the appropriate thing to do to meet your needs?"

Externally, there is a risk of corporate thoughtlessness. The models by which we develop funding tend to assume—correctly, of course—that most students will study full time, so we tend to put in place funding arrangements that support full-time students. However, at the margins, such models will disadvantage students with disabilities in respect of access to the disabled students allowance and loans, for example. There might be inadvertent issues for students with disabilities in that context.

The way in which the success of universities is measured is another issue. The time that it takes full-time students to progress towards degrees is measured, for example. That would be a perfectly reasonable measure in normal parlance—one hopes that students would start and finish their degrees within a reasonable timespan—but such a measure will not necessarily be the right one to apply if a student has a disability and is being, in their terms, very successful.

Marilyn Livingstone: The final question that I wanted to ask has more or less been answered. I was going to ask about monitoring and evaluation, but those issues have been covered.

The Convener: That is helpful, as we are trying to get through as much as possible as quickly as we can and we are running out of time.

John Swinburne: If you could make any changes to the further and higher education funding systems for people with disabilities, what would they be?

Ruth Hendery: There are funding issues relating to people with particularly complex needs. I am thinking of people who have been in special schools with a staff ratio of seven children to three members of staff, for example. When those people go to college, the funding mechanism will perhaps support a group of nine students to one member of staff. Perhaps partnership working can produce something more, as the students will not necessarily need learning support. However, supporting those young people is being considered in a broader context.

The big issue that we have in common is the ability of one group of students, in FE colleges in which there are FE and HE students, to access the disabled students allowance while the other cannot. Perhaps matters will be straightforward for the FE student—they may be able to go to the learning support team and get a laptop during the holidays or on day one—whereas the other student will have to go through a marathon process that involves a report to SAAS and the money coming down to them months later, but there are issues both ways. Perhaps the DSA will enable a student to draw down more funding and support, whereas the FE student may simply have to take their share of the funding, depending on how many students hit the pot of money that year. Inequity of funding is an issue, but I think that it is being considered.

Miki Quigley: I reinforce Ruth Hendery's point. It seems to me that there is an irony. A person would normally progress to the higher national certificate or higher national diploma education level having completed a national certificate-level academic course. Prior to that, perhaps they would have done a part-time return-to-learning course. It is during those early courses that people identify their needs and have them met, before progressing to courses at a higher level. However, if funding is not available to meet the needs of part-time or NC students, the chances are that they will not progress to a higher level. They will be denied access. That seems unfair, so perhaps the means of funding should be revisited.

Ruth Hendery: When they make the transition from school to college, many youngsters will tell us that they are dyslexic—or we may discover that they are dyslexic. Sometimes, educational psychologists in schools will have found out that youngsters are dyslexic but will not have made a report. As others have said, the youngsters then have to go through a costly assessment of their dyslexia. I have spoken to educational psychologists and asked, "Why don't you just write it down while they are at school? Why do we have to do a reassessment, get signatures and all the rest, before we can access funding?" That anomaly would not be difficult to clear up.

The Convener: That is now on the record.

Dr Rees: Funding has three aspects. First, we should not forget the physical infrastructure of our buildings. We have made many changes and adjustments but we have not finished yet. A sizeable investment in equipment is still required.

Secondly, universities and colleges have central support for students with disabilities. That can involve staffing and loans of equipment, for example. The ring-fenced funding comes to us in various ways—and we would never say that it was sufficient.

Thirdly—and this point has been made strongly by others—there is support for the individual student. The ways in which that support comes to the student have been eloquently covered.

Anne Simpson: They may have been eloquently covered, but some points are worth repeating—especially with regard to the timing of the disabled students allowance. We have to ask what the funding is for. We want to ensure that disabled students get what they need, so that they can access the courses of their choice. Sometimes that requires the assistance of a service—providing non-medical personal help, for example—and sometimes it requires equipment or other resources. So the question arises whether we can have the funding to provide what individual students need.

Premium funding is used—creatively, in some institutions, including my own—to improve provision in teaching departments and elsewhere. However, tensions can arise. Premium funding is created on the basis of individual applications for the disabled students allowance. If a university is doing its level best to improve accessibility, the need for individual students to receive a disabled students allowance should actually go down. However, we are giving higher education institutions a reward if the numbers go up. That is a bit of an anomaly.

For a very few disabled students, the cost of support—British Sign Language interpretation, or SpeedText services, for example—is phenomenally high, and there is not enough of it. I can recollect only one time in the past four or five years when the university was not able to offer a place to a disabled applicant on the ground of their disability. That was because we could not get a sign language interpreter to support the student on the course. As we would all agree, there was a national shortage.

12:15

A SpeedText service is when someone types up what the lecturer is saying as they are saying it; it costs £80 an hour. On a speech-heavy course such as counselling, the total cost of the service for the first week, which is pretty well full time, will be in the region of £3,000, which is a problem. The disabled students allowance certainly cannot meet such a high cost. My university provides additional funds to supplement the DSA, but I wonder whether the DSA ceiling could be raised for a very small number of students.

I agree that it is a shame that, for students who were dyslexic at school—one assumes that the disability is not new when they come to university—no report is forthcoming from the school, as that would have been helpful. However, because the dyslexia assessment is key to special exam arrangements such as additional exam time, my university takes the view that it would be unfair to make students pay for the additional cost of proving that they have the impairment, which is why the university pays for dyslexia assessments through premium funding.

John Swinburne: I take it from those answers that there is a layer of bureaucracy, the intention of which seems to be to make funding as difficult to obtain as possible, as happens with pensioners, who find it difficult to get supplementary benefit. The bureaucracy makes it impossible to get funding and when the funding is kept to a limited level, that is seen as a success. I do not ask you to respond to that, in case it embarrasses you.

The Convener: I am sure that the witnesses are happy to respond.

John Swinburne: The committee has heard that students may have difficulty accessing information about the support, courses and funding that are available and about aspects of student life. What information do you provide to disabled students and how do you monitor that provision to ensure that it is accessible and appropriate for your students' needs?

Dr Rees: We provide a lot of information to all our students. In addition, we provide specific information to students with disabilities through a publication that is provided in a range of appropriate formats. However, that does not make the process all very simple. Beyond doubt, the process is complex, as the students from whom you heard earlier said. We endeavour to make information available in a range of formats, but the key is to ensure that people rapidly get in contact with the college or university where they wish to study, because information comes across better when real human beings interpret it and help people to understand it.

The Convener: The witnesses should not feel that they have to respond to every question, but are there any other comments?

Ruth Hendery: Through work that we have been doing on the implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 we have been talking more to schools. For young people in special or other schools who have had a range of services, one of the biggest points of dislocation is their 16th birthday, when they move from child to adult services. On top of that, a year or so later, they will leave school. Schools generally do an excellent job of preparing people to leave school, but I often feel that we have a bit of work to do with schools on managing the information exchange to give teachers a better feel for what happens in college and what it is like there.

A young person who has had learning support at school, perhaps in a learning base, will have had a lot of one-to-one support and access to readers and scribes and a lot of other infrastructure. However, when they come to college, the model is designed to help them become a more independent learner. Ultimately, they will go out into the world of work, where they will not have a reader or a scribe and, although technology can be a help, they will simply need to negotiate extra time and become more self-reliant. We have a feeling that that is a big shock to kids and their parents, because they were not filled in on what college would be like. That is partly because schools do not fully know what it is like. I do not know whether that experience also causes ructions when people move on to university.

Dr Rees: We are always at the mercy of the assumptions that potential students and those who advise and guide them make. Even if we make information available, that does not mean that people will seek it out and read it. Assumptions might be made that people will be unable to do a certain course and that facilities will not be available for them. As I hope the committee has heard from us all, the range of courses offers many opportunities, and facilities are available. We constantly need to reinforce the message that we genuinely seek to make our universities and colleges as accessible as we can, on the basis that education is a valuable commodity that we want to make available to everybody, whether or not they have disabilities.

John Swinburne: What training do you provide to enable your staff to support disabled students effectively?

Miki Quigley: I can use my college as an example of what is done in further education. We provide staff with training that helps them to cope with all students and all the needs that are presented. A recent initiative in my college is that staff must maintain an online professional development log. Every time that they complete a piece of training—whether it is an internal or external event—they must record that and the purpose of the event. That information can be taken to their annual personal development meeting, at which they talk about the training that they have had. It can also be set against a checklist of national and in-house initiatives, new legislation and a range of issues on which we desire staff to have completed training that equips them and gives them knowledge to work with the students whom the legislation and initiatives are intended to support.

Between the online log, the in-house training that is supported by national training—much of which is provided by recognised national institutions such as the SFEU—and the checking of that against what staff have completed and with what student groups staff have applied that knowledge, a fairly comprehensive system is in place to take account of what staff do, why they do it and the timescale on which they do it. We try to relate that to the needs of all students, but we focus on students for whom legislation requires us to complete training, such as that on child protection or recognising the DDA.

John Swinburne: Do you agree that staff training in disability equality is a way of combating negative attitudes towards disabled people in further and higher education? Are there other ways of combating negative attitudes towards disabled people?

Ruth Hendery: First, I challenge the idea that the place is awash with folk who have negative attitudes. Things have moved on and many lecturers are much more geared up than they used to be in the days when the number of disabled students at college was much smaller.

One way in which we celebrate disability in our college—it is also common in others—is by celebrating success. We have prizegivings and ceremonies at which awards are given to people who have overcome barriers. That is a much more effective tool in helping people to have a vision that disabled people can and often do make it. We have had some wonderful students, such as the blind student who, with a guide dog in the classroom, did a sports instructor course. When staff see that working in one part of the college, the sharing of best practice is potent at winning hearts and minds.

Marlyn Glen: Nobody suggests that colleges and universities are awash with negative attitudes, but Anne Simpson said that engagement is sometimes patchy. Students tell us that they encounter negative attitudes—Katy McCloskey talked about the amount of work that she had to do to push for something that should have been given to her immediately. That is our focus. We are trying to focus on whether training is provided to all staff across the sector. We are also focusing on what happens if that training is not effective in encouraging people to give support and combating any negative attitudes perceived by students.

Dr Rees: We have latched on to disability awareness training, which is important, although I agree that there will be some who perhaps do not attend the training or appear not to have benefited from it. However, that training is only part of what we need to do. Going on a one-day training programme does not change attitudes. Interaction and practice, as well as people being aware of what are appropriate behaviours and supports, will change attitudes. University staff need people around them to advise them on that. Hence the importance of the role of a disability co-ordinator within an academic school whom staff can ask if they are doing the right thing to help a student with, say, a visual impairment. That kind of support is needed for staff, who are generally well-intentioned but sometimes inadvertently do things that are not supportive or helpful.

Anne Simpson: That is absolutely right. The idea that staff development occurs in a centre for academic practice that runs seminars for staff is only part of the story. What these provide should be very high quality staff development, focused on people’s roles as lecturers, providers of seminars or whatever. For example, an academic can listen to the experiences of people in different disciplines on how a subject was made accessible to someone with a particular impairment when originally it was thought inaccessible. That would be helpful for academics in subjects that may have fewer challenges. However, day-to-day interaction with disabled students is the more powerful learning experience.

The qualitative data from student feedback are important if students have expressed—as they do from time to time—negative views on higher education. It is important that we make those data available to staff whose attitudes may be less than desirable.

Ruth Hendery: The challenge is not so much that people are negative about disability issues, but that they do not know what to do. We must get across the sense that it is everyone's responsibility because at any point a disabled student could be in an academic's class. It is not about another group of staff looking after the issues. We are moving forward on this, but we have some way to go in getting people to have the confidence to ask for help and seek training. That is as well as our saying top-down, "Thou shalt be trained." It is a question of encouraging people to seek out additional information and even using their colleagues as sources of information and guidance.

Ms White: We have heard some examples of working with other agencies. Are there set-ups in place for universities and colleges to work in partnership with other agencies such as the national health service, employers, local government, housing associations and voluntary organisations?

Miki Quigley: Yes, we have both formal and informal set-ups. Formal partnerships may arise from forging new agreements with partners as a result of the Executive's partnership matters initiative. Colleges are beginning to forge ahead with these partnerships and to take the lead in setting up dates, times and venues to identify key organisations and named people within them. These will examine the partnerships' purposes, the issues that will be raised and how they will be resolved. They will also examine how to reach signed agreements about remits and responsibilities for coming up with the goods in addressing the whole gamut of issues and problems we face in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

12:30

Ms White: Do the institutions that you represent have direct links with other organisations and employers? We found an excellent example of that when we visited West Lothian College, which has direct links with employers in Livingston town centre and with local housing associations and health services, which can be useful if students have problems with housing benefit or are off sick. Is such an approach widespread in the further and higher education sector or is it patchy?

Miki Quigley: The approach might be patchy, but most colleges probably have strong, on-going direct links with local employers and services.

Ruth Hendery: We have always had a rapport with the organisations that traditionally refer students to us, such as social work departments and—more recently—housing and voluntary associations, because such organisations work with our students. In recent years the links have become more formal; we have legally binding collaborative arrangements about who provides what. Community-based activities form part of one of our college-based courses and the social work department provides staff in that context. Many colleges have arrangements, but much depends on the local authority. Our area is covered by three local authorities, but other colleges are based in a town. Such variables have an impact on the effectiveness of partnerships and the amount of hard work that is needed to put them in place.

Health has always been a difficult area, because college staff do not necessarily have an opposite number in the health service and must find an individual with whom they can work. The hardest aspect of negotiation can be the identification of an opposite number in an organisation with whom we can negotiate at a strategic level if we are planning services. Who we should work with in another organisation is not always obvious.

Ms White: Jewel and Esk Valley College has links with the social work services in its area.

Ruth Hendery: Yes.

Ms White: Do the institutions that the other witnesses represent have a comprehensive system of linking up with other agencies that work with disabled people?

Anne Simpson: There is a west of Scotland disability advisers forum, which is in collaboration with the national health service to consider issues to do with students with mental health difficulties. The forum supports initiatives such as the Scotland's mental health first aid training programme and research into the experiences of students who are mentally unwell. The forum has been useful in the exchange of information and the development of mental health policies and guidelines in institutions.

Ms White: Does the University of Strathclyde have links with employers?

Anne Simpson: There are informal links through the placement arrangements on some courses.

Ms White: I think that you have answered the question that I was going to ask about the funding difficulties that you face in relation to other agencies. You mentioned funding and timing problems to do with the DSA. Can you give examples of other difficulties that you face in your work with disabled students who want to continue to attend college?

Ruth Hendery: Personal care and transport are the two big difficulties, but the Scottish Executive guidance, "Partnership Matters", went a long way towards clarifying the situation. There remains a grey area in relation to people who have Asperger's syndrome. We must ascertain whether such people need learning support, which the college should provide, or personal care, which another agency should provide. We must start by considering the individual's needs and work with other agencies to consider how the support that is required can be funded. The intention of the partnership matters guidelines is to enable the parties to sit round a table and hammer out such issues before the student comes to college, so that the student does not encounter additional barriers to attending college.

Ms White: You have talked about funding for support and the timescale in which support is offered. Other agencies must be involved and perhaps there should be joined-up thinking and more frequent meetings. We will mention the matter in our report.

We have talked about joined-up thinking and good practice. Does a forum exist through which good practice and information can be disseminated among universities and colleges?

Dr Rees: Such a forum will exist. At the previous meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee, Rowena Arshad talked about the new Scottish equalities unit that the Scottish funding council will fund, the remit of which will include disability. That work will build on the success of existing activity, such as that of the Scottish disability team, which provides support for higher education. The benefit of the new equalities unit is that it will cover colleges and universities, on the basis that the same legislation applies to us all. Students and their needs are at the heart of what we do, regardless of where they choose to study.

Ms White: The unit's work will need to be monitored and evaluated.

Ruth Hendery: Certainly. The Scottish Further Education Unit routinely brings colleges together to trade best practice. HMIE also has a role.

Miki Quigley: The further education sector recognises that, as well as sharing good practice within the sector, we must endeavour to identify routes and forums through which we can externalise that good practice and share it with other key partners and organisations that are not necessarily involved in education, such as employers and voluntary organisations.

Anne Simpson: Perhaps much of the caution that has been expressed about the umbrella Scottish Executive equality unit is to do with the fact that the needs of disabled students are particular—I do not want to use the word "special". If the needs of disabled students who want to access education are to be met there must be a back-up of staff development and support, such as has been provided for 10 or more years by the Scottish disability team, which is based at the University of Dundee under the directorship of Paul Brown. It is important that such support is maintained in the new arrangements that the Scottish funding council puts in place.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their helpful evidence.

12:36

Meeting suspended.

12:40

On resuming—

The Convener: I extend a warm welcome to our third panel this morning. Thank you for sitting through all the previous evidence; I am sure you will have found it interesting.

I welcome Lorna Caldwell, Leia Fitzgerald and Alan Scott from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland. Good afternoon. What is SAAS's current role in supporting disabled students in accessing further and higher education?

Alan Scott (Student Awards Agency for Scotland): We have no responsibility for further education; we work purely in higher education. SAAS is responsible for the operational delivery of funding, rather than for the formulation of policy, which falls to colleagues elsewhere in the Executive and to the minister, obviously. We are more about providing information and guidance to students, as well as making payments to them. We make them aware of how much funding they are entitled to and the application process they must use to access support for higher education.

The Convener: Perhaps you can tell us more about your role in higher education.

Alan Scott: Students can currently access three thresholds in the disabled students allowance: an allowance for non-medical personal help, the maximum limit of which is in the region of £11,800 per year; an allowance of around £4,500 for large items of equipment, such as personal computers, laptops and so on, that students can access over the duration of their course; and a basic allowance of about £1,600 per year that students can access for anything additional. We provide the application forms to students and they come back to us. We process the applications and make payments.

Outwith that side of the operation, we also have a role in a recently formed disabled students stakeholder group with colleagues in the Executive, other stakeholders and key delivery partners such as NUS Scotland, Skill Scotland, the Scottish disability team, representatives from the Beattie resources for inclusiveness in technology and education centre and the access centres. The group considers the support that is in place for disabled students, and many policy initiatives have come out of it. Key delivery partners have collaborated on changing the face of the disabled student allowance and the support that is available to disabled students.

Marlyn Glen: SAAS has a role in informing, so how does it inform people about the services that it provides?

12:45

Alan Scott: As well as providing specific annual literature, such as the application forms, we provide the guidance on the disabled students allowance that we send out to institutions. It is also available on our website.

In recent years, we have sent every school in Scotland a CD-ROM that gives information on support arrangements and on how school pupils can access higher education funding if they progress to that level. On the CD-ROM we also advertise the fact that, for the past couple of years, we have been in a position to go out to schools and provide information to them directly. In the past 12 months we have given talks to fifth and sixth-year pupils in more than 30 private and public schools, which have made them aware of the support arrangements and the application process.

We attend careers fairs throughout Scotland, which many universities and colleges also attend. In the past year, we have attended 30 or 40 such events and provided information to fourth, fifth and sixth-year pupils to make them aware of the process that they will have to go through if they want to access higher education and, if they have a disability, how the support arrangements differ. We have taken steps to promote ourselves not only to existing students—we attend open days at universities and colleges—but to the future student population. We want to make them aware of their involvement in the overall process.

Marlyn Glen: It sounds as if you are doing more to promote SAAS, but given our focus on disabled students, is there anything that you can do to ensure that information on your services is available and accessible?

Alan Scott: We do a customer survey and we take on board any feedback that comes in from students about the delivery of support and the operational aspects. We are part of the disabled students stakeholder group and so is the NUS. Any concerns that it has are fed through that group so that changes can be made.

Marlyn Glen: Do you use accessible formats?

Leia Fitzgerald (Student Awards Agency for Scotland): Yes. Documents are available in Braille and in large print, and we can provide them in other formats if somebody makes a request. I have worked for SAAS for six years and I have never had people say that information is not accessible or had any special requests for information in different formats.

Marlyn Glen: That is interesting.

The Convener: It would be interesting to know how many disabled students have responded to your surveys and evaluations, given that Leia Fitzgerald said that you have not had requests for information in accessible formats. I imagine that disabled students are less likely to respond or to raise issues.

Alan Scott: We send the survey to about 3,000 students but, as I understand it, there is only about a 10 per cent take-up. It is not sent specifically to disabled students; it is sent to a random selection.

The Convener: We are pleased that you are here this morning, because lots of disabled students have raised concerns about accessing information from your organisation. That is why we are asking about feedback from disabled students. If there is an issue for them but they have not been able to feed back, you will not know that there have been problems.

Alan Scott: The feedback that we get from students tends to be about their individual cases, especially if things have not gone to plan and they have a particular grievance about the way in which their case has been dealt with. I suspect that feedback on more general areas, such as the overall support that is available to students, goes to our colleagues at the Scottish Executive, rather than to the SAAS.

Marlyn Glen: I could be quite cynical and suggest that most disabled students get help to fill in their forms, which is perhaps why you do not get that feedback—it is usual for those students to access help. However, I will leave the specific questions to my colleagues.

Lorna Caldwell (Student Awards Agency for Scotland): We are participating in the funding for disabled students project, which our colleagues in the funding for learners division of the Scottish Executive are taking forward. We are looking at a forum to which students with disabilities can appeal if they have a grievance about not only our procedures, but the procedures that they encounter when they go for their needs assessment.

The Convener: We would be interested to see how that project develops.

Lorna Caldwell: It is only in its initial stages.

The Convener: I realise that.

Mr McGrigor: Students and, indeed, universities have told us that the application process can be complex and lengthy. Do you agree and, if so, what can be done to simplify it?

Lorna Caldwell: Any process will take longer if it involves more than one agency or body. However, SAAS aims within 20 days to turn around for assessment any application that it receives, and our figures show that we are doing so.

Alan Scott mentioned our disabled students stakeholder group. As a result of that group, we have introduced a toolkit for quality indicators which, although still in its pilot stages, has already made a difference. For example, delays occurred because, initially, assessments took place at four access centres and could be carried out by 11 other bodies. Since the toolkit was introduced, 11 more assessment centres have been established. As I have said, we have seen a difference in turnaround times but, because the project is only a pilot, we will not find out how the whole system has worked until the year is out.

Alan Scott: We would be interested in finding out which areas of the SAAS application form students have had concerns about or have found too lengthy. At the moment, if a student ticks a specific box on the main support application, they will be sent the DSA application, which I think is about seven or eight pages long.

Although we do not want to go down this route, it would be much simpler to have a checkbox on the DSA application which, if ticked, would mean that people with specific disabilities would be allocated a set amount. However, we have moved away from that approach to a much more needs-led system, in which sections of the application form contain free-text boxes to allow students to explain their needs. After all, one dyslexic student will not necessarily need the same support as another dyslexic student.

Moreover, with this application system, institutions, in the shape of the disability adviser, can participate in the process and assist the student with completing the form. Obviously, because we produce the form we do not think that it is complicated, but we realise that a lot of students find the process quite lengthy. As a result, we would be interested in hearing people's feedback and concerns, to find out whether a specific part of the form is causing problems. We could consider taking any recommendations on board and making changes wherever necessary.

Mr McGrigor: I cannot tell you what parts of the form are causing difficulties, but I am interested in your response to the question.

Students have told us that they would like certain aspects of the application process to be made more flexible. For example, they felt that there should be more use of accessible technology to allow telephone calls and e-mails to be included as correspondence. Will you consider that suggestion?

Leia Fitzgerald: We have already taken such steps. For example, instead of having to write a letter, students can e-mail their inquiries to us. Moreover, in the past couple of months, we have introduced a new telephony system that makes it easier for students to get through to us and which allows us to record calls and monitor our feedback. We are constantly updating our technology. A lot of disabled students are using our e-mail facility, which has taken off in the past few years.

Lorna Caldwell: We are also about to introduce a text service. I am not sure what length it will go to, but it will remind students to apply. I do not know whether it will be DSA specific but, in relation to travel, it will provide some sort of warning about closing dates. Again, we will ask whether there are any ways in which we can help people with that format.

Ms White: I note what you said about your caseload being made up mostly of individuals' cases. To what extent do you provide an individualised, person-centred approach to students? Do you act only when they complain about certain aspects of their funding?

Lorna Caldwell: Several years ago, case workers in the agency had a specific allocation of work, which might be a percentage of the overall work to do with someone on a specific course at a specific institution. However, as has been said, technology in the agency has progressed substantially and we now have an electronic document management system that means that everyone has access to the same information. The new telephony system means that a caller can enter their phone number or a reference number, if they have it to hand, which will bring up all the student's information on the screen of the case worker. That information includes details of previous calls and inquiries and provides a complete history.

For the past two or three years, technology has enabled us to have a specific team that deals with nothing but DSA inquiries. Students who apply for DSA have an agent who works on their undergraduate student support, which gets treated separately; that means that immediate attention is focused on the DSA application. We feel that, rather than there being a specific case worker, the process flows more easily when whoever is available at a certain time can deal with the situation. In the past, I might have had a certain allocation and Leia might have had a slightly different one. If my workload was slightly greater, that might have had a delaying effect on the case of the student that I had been allocated. Now, the student is picked up by the first person who is available.

Alan Scott: In the past couple of years, the DSA team and other SAAS staff have attended specific training. Representatives from Capability Scotland gave a two-day seminar to staff, which the DSA team attended. The team has also visited the BRITE centre out at Stevenson College in order to understand better the kind of references that are made in many of the needs assessment reports. In proportional terms, the agency allocates more staff to deal with the group of students who receive the disabled student allowance.

Ms White: The situation seems to have improved.

Nora Radcliffe: Is there a way of avoiding the need for students to reapply each year if their circumstances have not changed?

Leia Fitzgerald: My experience is that there are few students whose circumstances do not change. They change courses and, as they enter their third and fourth years, the amount of work that they are required to do increases. Technology changes as well; a bit of equipment that they had in their first year might be obsolete by the time they get to fourth year. It is to students' advantage to apply every year and to let us know how their needs have changed, even if it is just a matter of their needing a further two hours of medical help a year.

Alan Scott: We have introduced a shortened application process for students who claim only tuition-fee support or the non-income-assessed loan support. That captures their information from one year to another and is sent out directly to them. If they are happy to get the same support the next year, we require only a signature from them. For the reasons that Leia Fitzgerald highlighted, that is not extended to students who claim DSA.

13:00

Nora Radcliffe: So the annual application process builds in flexibility.

Alan Scott: Yes because—depending on how the course develops—a student's needs for equipment may change although they have the same disability. The current process provides scope to deal with that. In any case, because student support is reviewed and rates are uprated annually, we have an audit and public accountability requirement to get some form of student signature annually.

Marilyn Livingstone: We have heard from many students about delays in assessments, which lead to missed opportunities and can mean that students fall through the net and miss out on entrance to a year's academic study. Problems will always arise, but how can the assessment process be improved and made much more student centred so that students can access funding when they need to? When a student may miss out altogether, can a temporary solution be put in place?

Alan Scott: Lorna Caldwell highlighted our work through the stakeholder group to introduce a toolkit of quality indicators for institutions. The aim is to bring more institutions into the needs assessment process because of the substantial bottleneck at access centres in recent years. If we receive a disabled student's application without a needs assessment report, we refer the case to one of the access centres. Under the new pilot scheme, about a dozen institutions are authorised to carry out needs assessments, so we no longer have to go to the access centres, which takes the pressure off them. We have already seen a slight improvement in the overall timescales within which the SAAS refers applications to an access centre and receives a report back from it. We are, with colleagues in the Executive, taking steps to encourage more institutions—we hope some of the larger ones—to come on board, which will result in improvement in the overall turnaround time.

Another point is that many applications for DSA come into the agency within a week or two of the student's starting their course, which creates a bottleneck in the autumn. We need a better system in order that we can spread the applications throughout the summer. I am not aware of the processes that universities and colleges use for identifying their students, but if those processes or the UCAS clearing system were used to engage students and to make them aware of the process that is involved in claiming DSA, that would help to spread applications throughout the summer and it would reduce pressure by reducing the number of applications in the autumn. We make people aware of the process when we promote our work in schools but, in many cases, the first contact that we have with a student is when their application comes in.

Marilyn Livingstone: What percentage of institutions are already on board in the scheme that you mentioned and in what timescale do you envisage getting other institutions on board and rolling out the scheme? If barriers arise to a student accessing a course, do you have any flexibility to help with that?

Alan Scott: Steps have already been taken to bring more institutions on board—about seven or eight are going through the application process and have just a few indicators to finalise. We hope that more institutions will come on board in the short term.

Your second point was about barriers. In recent years, we have allowed a bit more flexibility. We have made advance payments to students in cases in which an institution has pointed out that a student requires specific training in the use of equipment, for example. We can make payments up to a month in advance of a student starting their course, and we have done so. There is flexibility in that area, but we have received advice—probably from solicitors—that we should not make payments more than four weeks in advance because it is not clear whether a person is a student before they start their course. To make payments earlier than that would have many implications. If we were to provide a person with money and they did not take up their place, there would be an issue about recovering the money from them, because it could be argued that they were not a student in the first place.

Nora Radcliffe: I want to raise a technical matter. You said that the number of DSA applications peaks just after students start their courses. How does that peak fit in with other peaks and troughs of pressure on your resources?

Leia Fitzgerald: Our peak tends to fall later than the main processing session, when the rest of the agency is quieter, so we can call on a great deal of support and help from other parts of the agency.

John Swinburne: If it was in your gift to change any aspect of the service that you provide to make it more responsive to disabled people, what would you do?

Leia Fitzgerald: Nearly everyone has mentioned the problem of identifying students' disabilities. The universities do a great job, but it might not be picked up that a student has dyslexia, for example, until they start their course at university. The student could be three or four months into their course before realising that he or she is struggling. More work could be done in schools on identifying such disabilities before people go to university. I do not know whether universities would be able to provide more equipment to lend to students while they go through the process of applying to us.

People talk about stigma. I think that for many students there is a big gap between the work that they have to do at school and the work that they have to do at university, which means that they might not realise that they will need support. They might think that because they coped fine at school, there is no need to speak to the disability adviser or to ask for help. Students need to be encouraged to speak to someone, perhaps before they start their courses, even if they do not think that they will need help. That will enable disabilities to be identified more quickly.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your helpful evidence. We will take a short break to allow the witnesses to leave the table; I ask members not to leave.

13:08

Meeting suspended.

13:10

On resuming—

Equalities Review

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is the committee's equalities review. Today we are considering the research proposal for the first part of the review. Are members happy with the proposal? Do you have any comments? I think that John Swinburne has a comment.

John Swinburne: I will be brief, and I am sorry to take up the committee's time. I will read out this paper as quickly as I can. It is for consideration by the Equal Opportunities Committee, with regard to the proposed schedule.

I would like to take issue with the basic fact that the most important strand of equality is not even on our agenda. Although I agree that age, disability, gender, race, religion and sexual orientation are all extremely important issues that must feature prominently in all our deliberations, I contend that we are missing the greatest factor and the one that impacts most on inequality—poverty.

Poverty is the root cause of the majority of inequalities for the citizens of Scotland. It can, and does, make the difference between life and death. Just ask the families of the 8,000 and more pensioners who have died of winter-related causes in the past few years. Most schoolchildren—

The Convener: John, may I stop you—

John Swinburne: Wait until I have finished.

The Convener: What you are saying is not relevant.

John Swinburne: It is very relevant.

The Convener: It is not relevant to what we are talking about.

John Swinburne: It is very relevant.

The Convener: If you are going to be brief, you may continue and—

John Swinburne: What I am saying is very relevant.

The Convener: Poverty is relevant, but we are talking about our equalities review.

John Swinburne: Yes.

The Convener: The committee is committed to a taking stock exercise on age.

John Swinburne: Yes.

The Convener: General poverty in terms of children in communities is an issue for the Communities Committee. Our role is to consider equalities.

John Swinburne: So you are not interested in poverty.

The Convener: I am not saying that.

John Swinburne: Okay.

The Convener: I am saying that this committee has a particular remit.

John Swinburne: Okay, I will be resigning from your committee if you are not prepared to listen to the argument that I am making. I will resign—

The Convener: I am reminding you that the remit of the committee—

John Swinburne: I would like to move formally that poverty should in the future be an integral part of this committee's remit.

The Convener: John, we did not agree this committee's remit. It is a—

John Swinburne: We should alter this committee's remit if we are not happy—

The Convener: John—listen to what I am saying. This is a standing committee of the Parliament. The remit of the committee was set out at the start of the Parliament. Another committee deals with poverty and community issues.

I am not disagreeing that poverty should be a priority for the whole Parliament, but this committee's role is to consider equalities. We need to stick to that. There are issues that—

John Swinburne: How can you have equality when you have got poverty that you are condoning?

The Convener: It can be argued that if you do not have equality you will always have poverty. But the remit of this committee is equalities. Yes?

John Swinburne: Well, I was—

The Convener: That remit was set out before you and I were—

John Swinburne: I was going to say that poverty should be a key consideration in the development of this committee's legacy paper to be passed on to the next committee.

This is an excellent committee; it has been a pleasure working on it. But, at the same time, there are issues—

Ms White: I am the reporter on age issues—what John Swinburne is saying is very important. When we consider the taking stock exercise on age—for elderly people and for young people—we will discover the truth of the figures that John has been bandying about. Many pensioners are living in poverty and this committee will have a report on that. Our remit is not poverty, but I can promise John that poverty will feature in the age report.

The Convener: You are absolutely right, Sandra. That is how we work.

John Swinburne: You will be doing it without my assistance. I have more things to do with my time. This morning we had an excellent conversation and discussion, but this committee is becoming a talking shop. We have to highlight the genuine problems in Scotland that Parliament can attack.

The Convener: This morning we have been listening to evidence—

John Swinburne: It was brilliant.

The Convener: Let me remind you that we were discussing a barrier that disabled people in Scotland face. Disabled people are probably among the poorest people in Scotland.

John Swinburne: Yes.

The Convener: That is not only because they cannot access education and leisure services but because they cannot access work. If one cannot access work, one is poor. We are trying to change that. If you do not think that that is valuable work, I challenge your view.

John Swinburne: By the same token, a disabled person in poverty's chances of rising above that to the level that we were discussing earlier are negligible. We should address that.

The Convener: That is what we are trying to change. You went—

John Swinburne: We will not be trying to change it unless we talk about it.

The Convener: We have spent the past year trying to do some of this work. You are new to the committee. This committee has been up and down the country speaking to disabled people, including disabled young people—

13:15

John Swinburne: The committee has been doing great work.

The Convener: We do not want just to talk; we want to make recommendations that will lead to changes. I have told every participation group that we have attended that the inquiry is not just about talking. If people challenge what SAAS says because they cannot obtain the money to attend college or university, or if they challenge what colleges are doing because they are doing pretendy courses that will never give them the opportunity to earn money to improve their situation, we want to change that. We are doing what people have asked us to do. We will make recommendations that will challenge poverty.

John Swinburne: I am not asking you to give up any strand of equality that the committee is pursuing; I am asking only that you to add another strand—the most important strand—which is the poverty that brings about and exacerbates many of the issues that have been discussed.

The Convener: In a sense, I agree with you that inequalities bring about poverty. We are considering how to challenge inequality issues. We want an equalities review that will examine whether the Executive is doing what it should do and what is happening in Scotland. We will consider what the review can do to highlight inequalities. Inequalities occur across the board and they bring in poverty. However, poverty is not on the list of strands because the committee's role is to consider equalities. I would like to consider communities, but we are not the Communities Committee.

John Swinburne: If we are not happy with the situation, surely we can challenge it and change it.

The Convener: We need to deal with what we have.

Nora Radcliffe: We cannot place all responsibilities on one committee.

Marilyn Livingstone: I remind John Swinburne that we agreed to undertake a comprehensive and in-depth study of disabilities following the European year of disabled people. We took the view that the inquiry should have a geographical spread and that we should speak to people from all age groups, achieve gender balance and so on. We wanted to examine issues that disabled people told us were important to them, which concerned accessing leisure, work and education. We are following up on their requests. We hope to have a body of evidence such that when we progress our review, it will be the most comprehensive review ever of services for disabled people. I am proud of that.

John Swinburne: I compliment you on doing that; that is marvellous.

Marilyn Livingstone: That is our job. What we are doing will of course cover poverty issues, but our inquiry concerns disabled people. The committee unanimously agreed on that and we must focus on that, which will show up poverty issues. We are saying that poverty is proving to be a barrier to learning and that it is one issue that we will raise with the Executive. However, we are not considering poverty on its own but how it fits into our inquiry.

The Convener: Likewise, if the equalities review identifies discrimination that leads to poverty, that will be picked up. John—you and I have discussed equalities and you are bang on. It is not that you are not interested in equalities; I know that you are.

John Swinburne: Do not get me wrong—the committee is doing great work and is to be complimented on it. No one can decry the outstanding work that it has done. I am asking only that the committee add another strand to the six strands of inequalities—not to discuss it now, but rather to leave it in our legacy document for the future.

The Convener: Of the six equality strands that we cover, poverty runs through at least four, if not more.

Marilyn Livingstone: Yes.

Ms White: Yes—poverty is not a strand but a result.

The Convener: Whether the issue is age or discrimination because of someone's disability or gender, poverty can be an integral consideration.

John Swinburne: If this powerful committee highlighted problems with poverty in Scotland today, someone somewhere would be bound to sit up and take notice. We are skirting around the edges instead of going to the heart of the problem, which is that people are living in poverty. Children are in poverty. The Government talks about lifting children out of absolute poverty into relative poverty; that is appalling. Such a situation should not exist in modern-day Scotland. All that I am saying is that, as the Equal Opportunities Committee, we should highlight that.

The Convener: We have discussed undertaking an equalities review of the Executive's work, which falls within our role. That review will pick up issues of poverty.

The committee's remit is to cover the six equalities strands and to scrutinise issues that relate to equalities. Our highlighting of inequalities will highlight where there is deprivation, discrimination and poverty.

John Swinburne: So why not make poverty an additional strand so that there are seven strands?

The Convener: It is not in our remit to—

John Swinburne: Cannot we do so because Canon Kenyon Wright did not agree to do so prior to 1999? Come on.

The Convener: The committee's equalities remit is included in Parliament's standing orders.

Ms White: The only way of getting rid of poverty is through independence.

The Convener: We will not to go into that.

John, I would not like to lose you from the committee because you have participated well in its work.

John Swinburne: I am sorry, but if poverty is not concentrated on to the same extent as the other six strands are concentrated on, I am afraid that you will lose me and I will find another committee.

The Convener: Perhaps you should consider the Communities Committee, but it is a shame to lose you.

John Swinburne: Okay. Thank you.

The Convener: I return to the equalities review, which we have discussed previously, as members will recall. Do members have any other comments to make on the proposals?

Marlyn Glen: I am content with them, but I want to ask about the range of practices and policy developments that will be considered. Will we look at education, employment, wealth, public appointments and so on? Will the review be that big?

The Convener: As I tried to explain to John Swinburne, the review will be wide and will cover all areas.

Marlyn Glen: That is excellent. It will be important to highlight Professor Curtice's research on social attitudes.

The Convener: The review will consider all the things that have been mentioned. It will provide an opportunity to consider equalities throughout Scotland. If we highlight relevant areas, that will be a considerable legacy.

Are members content for the proposal to be submitted to the Conveners Group, which will clearly need to discuss resources?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Disability Inquiry

13:22

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is our disability inquiry. The clerks have circulated a paper that contains the proposed schedule of meetings between March and June in which the committee can take evidence for the inquiry and develop its recommendations. Members will note the move to weekly meetings. We have raised the expectation of many disabled people and organisations in this country that we will make changes, and we need to ensure that our paper is ready by the end of the year in order to do so. We must therefore meet weekly. We have received smashing evidence today and have heard a lot of good stuff, but we now need to pull things together, finish the inquiry and make recommendations. Are folk happy with the proposal to meet weekly?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Mr McGrigor: May I make a wee statement, convener? I would like to apologise to you and to other committee members for my absence from recent meetings.

The Convener: We understand that you have been sick.

Mr McGrigor: I was ill and certain members of my family were at death's door. However, the situation is—luckily—resolving itself and I hope that I will return to my normal practice soon.

The Convener: That is good. I am pleased to have you back. We all know that life goes on outside Parliament.

As we have agreed to meet weekly in order to consider the issues thoroughly, do members agree to the timescale for producing draft recommendations in the disability inquiry? Are members happy to delegate authority to me and to the clerks to identify witnesses to give oral evidence?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: As we are used to having fortnightly rather than weekly meetings, members should ensure that the meeting dates are in their diaries.

I thank members for attending.

Meeting closed at 13:24.

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