OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 16 May 2018

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 16 May 2018

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
15th Meeting 2018, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Professor Sir Ian Diamond (University of Aberdeen)
Professor Craig Mahoney (University of the West of Scotland)
Professor Jeffrey Sharkey (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland)
Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland)
Susan Stewart (The Open University in Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 16 May 2018

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (James Dornan): I welcome everyone to the Education and Skills Committee's 15th meeting in 2018. I remind everyone who is present to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the meeting.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take item 3 in private. Is everyone content to take that item in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Widening Access

09:45

The Convener: Item 2 is an evidence session on widening access. The committee has previously visited the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland to discuss widening access with a number of higher education institutions, and it has taken evidence from the commissioner for fair access and the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science.

I welcome Professor Sir Ian Diamond, principal and vice-chancellor of the University of Aberdeen; Professor Craig Mahoney, principal and vice-chancellor of the University of the West of Scotland; Professor Jeffrey Sharkey, principal of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland; Alastair Sim, director of Universities Scotland; and Susan Stewart, director of the Open University in Scotland. I invite Alastair Sim to make a brief opening statement.

Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland): Thank you for the invitation to give evidence and to make an opening statement. Every leader of a Scottish higher education institution is thoroughly committed to wide access to higher education. That value is intrinsic to Scottish higher education, and we welcome the high cross-party priority that politicians have given it.

The commission on widening access set a new level of challenge for all parts of the education system. In his annual report, the commissioner for fair access described the commission's vision of equal access to higher education as being

"among the most ambitious in the world."

We are rising to our part of that challenge.

In November 2017, Universities Scotland published "Working to Widen Access", which set out our programme of action for taking forward the commissioner's recommendations. It includes national and institutional reviews of admissions policy and practice and consideration by institutions of the entrance requirements for every course. Institutions will set minimum entry requirements that will open courses to people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who have the ability to succeed.

Each institution is re-examining its contextualised admissions policy to ensure that there is special consideration of candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds whose exam results might not reflect their full potential. We are looking at widening the categories of applicants who are given special consideration by all institutions so that the categories include, for instance, learners

who are eligible for free school meals or education maintenance allowance.

Articulation from college to university can be a powerful tool for widening access. The majority of people who continue in the same subject area from college to university already get full credit for their college achievements, and every institution is considering how to drive that further.

We have set up a joint project with Colleges Scotland and the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council to break down any national-level barriers. The project will examine how to achieve a better curricular match between higher national qualifications and university in subjects in which people from college are not currently getting full credit.

Importantly, we are looking at the language that we use to communicate about admissions policy and practice. We will work with learners and their advisers on that. At the moment, such language can be precise but opaque, and it varies between institutions. We want to create clear and consistent language about admissions.

All our actions need to support true lifelong learning. We are pleased that the commissioner and the Scottish Government have recognised that mature learners are included in the targets from the commission on widening access. We also need to ensure that part-time learners, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds and have demanding care responsibilities, are seen as core to wide access.

Our submission summarises the progress that has been made. We are closing in on the target of at least 16 per cent of entrants coming from the most deprived 20 per cent of backgrounds. In 2015-16, 14.8 per cent of entrants came from the most deprived 20 per cent of areas in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, and all our diverse institutions are pulling their weight. Someone from an SIMD 20 background who applies to university is now as likely to be offered a place as their more privileged peers.

Full achievement of our national ambitions on wide access will require joined-up action across the Government and multiple levels of education. We need to measure success intelligently, given that the majority of income-deprived people live outside the most deprived areas as measured by SIMD. As we widen access for the most socioeconomically deprived, we must not lose sight of the need to be fair to learners from all other backgrounds, many of whom have their own challenges.

As the commissioner noted, the critical issue is the need to increase the number of qualified applicants from deprived backgrounds, as there is still a stark poverty-related attainment gap. The latest information from the Scottish Government shows that only 20 per cent of school leavers from the most deprived decile have three or more highers or the equivalent compared with 70 per cent of the most privileged school leavers.

We are pleased that the commissioner intends to look at how schools can contribute to the national ambitions, and we will welcome the committee's insights into how Government, schools, colleges and the university sector can best realise our shared ambitions.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr Sim. Liz Smith will begin our questions.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning. I will concentrate on the ability of schools to be part of the widening access process. We live in an age in which it is increasingly difficult for Scotland-domiciled students to get a place at university, because demand exceeds the supply in the capped system. Consequently, their school qualifications are exceptionally important, particularly for those who come from deprived backgrounds.

Last week, we saw evidence from Professor Jim Scott that the number of advanced higher courses on offer to those from deprived backgrounds is diminishing. He investigated 360 schools and found that more than half of them have reduced their secondary 4 subject choice, which is a serious problem. How can we address that issue particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, among whom we want to raise aspirations? It is fine to raise their aspirations, but only if we enable them to take the courses that they need to take.

Alastair Sim: I will answer that question briefly and my colleagues may have experience to draw on, such as on the supply of people who are studying music at school.

There must be a whole-system effort. Universities are conscious that the availability of advanced highers is patchy across the education system. They are assisting by providing advanced higher hubs and allowing access to university facilities to people who are studying for advanced highers. There are also joint work initiatives among schools, colleges and universities to increase the availability of advanced highers. However, the offers that universities make to candidates are based principally on highers, as a result of the limits on the availability of advanced highers and because the availability of advanced highers tends to be concentrated in the most privileged areas.

Subject choice has been a matter of significant debate. We are reliant on people coming through the school system with a sufficient range of qualifications to enable them to get on to the most

selective courses. Of course, there are discontinuities. For example, if someone is going to university to study ancient history, they may not be required to have a lot of prior experience of that in school, because there is just not very much of that available at school.

We do our best to meet learners where they are; nonetheless, we are reliant on a supply chain of people with a reasonably wide range of qualifications at school level.

Liz Smith: I will pursue that line. The advanced higher is seen as Scotland's best qualification by many educationists not just in Scotland but south of the border and internationally. Therefore, it is vital that schools in rural areas, which might not be able to take advantage of the hubs, are able to develop their advanced higher courses so that the youngsters whom we want to attract to university but who do not have the option of going there are able to do so.

Do you acknowledge that we must do much more at the school level to ensure that those qualifications are readily available to all pupils who have the potential to gain them, thereby increasing the number of admissions to university?

The Convener: Before Mr Sim responds, I ask that we keep our questions short and the answers as succinct as possible, because we have a lot to get through today. I should have said that before Liz Smith started her questioning

Alastair Sim: That would be great. The Scottish Government acknowledged that last week, in its report "The 15-24 Learner Journey Review", which identified the wider availability of advanced highers as something to work towards.

Susan Stewart (The Open University in Scotland): The young applicants in schools scheme, which is run by the Open University, has been going for 10 years and, this year, we have 1,100 sixth year students throughout Scotland participating in YASS. It is Scotland's only nationwide school-to-university bridging programme. It is not an alternative to advanced highers, but it is a widening access initiative.

Liz Smith: My final question is for Professor Sharkey. When we visited the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, you made a very interesting point about the conservatoire's own 100 per cent commitment to widening access and to diversity, but you said specifically that there is not the best potential in some schools for pupils to study music and arts subjects. Could you expand on that?

Professor Jeffrey Sharkey (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland): After this meeting I am heading to West Lothian to meet city council leadership there to urge them to see whether we can partner up to keep string provision alive in the area. Children have to start certain art forms very young—at primary school. If children do not start strings or ballet in primary school, it will be too late for them to even begin to approach the level that they would need to reach to study at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

Further than that, we want to make the case, in partnership with all parties and with Government, that the country benefits from the creative learning that access to the performing arts provides. Physical education is statutory but access to the performing arts is not. We are told that we must exercise the body, but what about the critical ability to exercise creativity and the imagination, which access to the performing arts provides?

We want to work in partnership. We are worried about the pipeline and our ability to attract students from the most disadvantaged areas, whether we measure disadvantage by SIMD or by rural deprivation. It will become harder to attract those students if the provision does not stay accessible and, if not free, certainly affordable for young people in the country.

Liz Smith: Thank you very much.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I will make a brief point about advanced highers and then a more substantive point. A young person from a more deprived area is less likely to be able to sit five or six highers in fifth year, so access to advanced highers becomes really important. However, we are now in a situation where a young person from a poorer background not only is less likely to be able to study for a good group of highers in fifth year but is not going to access advanced highers. Even if they do, as you have just said, universities will take more account of highers than of advanced highers. Surely, that is unacceptable.

Is there a long-term plan to decide which qualification matters most? Is it the advanced higher or the higher? Which of those should it be, and how do we make sure that young people from more deprived backgrounds have access to those opportunities?

For a lot of young people, their first year at university is a repeat of what they have done in their advanced highers. For young people who have less access to income, that is not the best use of their time and resource. How do we resolve that dilemma?

Alastair Sim: Before any of my colleagues gives the expert practitioner view, I will say that, just on a statistical level, it is important to note that very few students are coming to university with a good clutch of advanced highers at the moment. The Scottish Government learner journey review said that it was around 5 per cent of students,

which reflects the low availability of advanced highers.

Learners often take highers over multiple years in the senior phase. Universities have engaged with that and, increasingly, the accumulation of qualifications over the multiple years of the senior phase is valued among entry requirements. However, my colleagues are more expert on that.

Johann Lamont: I will give you a direct example of the challenge that we face, and I would be interested in your solution to it. A young woman has a good clutch of highers and has been given offers by universities down south. She does not live in an SIMD area, but her family income is £11,000 a year. She cannot access university in Scotland because the qualification that is needed is higher. In my view, we are rationing places at university because of the cap. We are rationing by qualification when young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be able to reach that qualification.

The young woman cannot go to university down south, because she cannot afford to live away from home. What do we do? She does not get a contextualised admission offer. Universities give multiple offers to some young people who qualify for a contextualised place, but this young woman cannot access a place at all. If she goes to university at all, she will have to go down south. How can that possibly be a rational way of dealing with the question of access to higher education for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

10:00

Alastair Sim: That is an incredibly difficult circumstance, and it points to the need to measure deprivation intelligently. If we are tasked simply with meeting targets on the basis of SIMD—I am not talking about universities' actions, because universities' actions should encourage everyone with deprivation characteristics to apply—we know that targets do not make sense if they exclude, as the authors of SIMD say, about two thirds of people who are income deprived. We therefore need to look at the indicators much more intelligently to see who needs special treatment.

Johann Lamont: I have spoken previously about the density of disadvantage. Even if a child is not disadvantaged, living in a community that is disadvantaged will have an impact on the school that they go to and so on. What representations have been made to address that very simple question? A young woman from a family with an income of £11,000 a year did not get a contextualised offer. Surely, we could change that by the end of the summer.

Professor Craig Mahoney (University of the West of Scotland): I do not know of the example to which you refer, but I assure you that, when students apply to my university, we look at their capability to complete the degree. Whether they come with advanced highers, highers or no qualifications, we offer students a place on the basis of their capacity to demonstrate that they can complete the degree. I am very happy to look at the application to which you refer and consider whether the young woman would be eligible for a place at UWS.

Professor Sir Ian Diamond (University of Aberdeen): At the University of Aberdeen, we cannot use only SIMD data, and we do not. I see that Richard Lochhead is here. In Moray, there is one SIMD postcode that would fit the definition of disadvantaged. Richard Lochhead and I would agree that Moray is a very beautiful place, but it is not a bastion of privilege right across the board. Therefore, the University of Aberdeen needs to look at a broader definition of disadvantage and a wider range of factors, such as where a person's school is, what their household income level is and whether they are the first generation in their household to go to university. We give contextualised admissions to anyone whom we believe has the capability, regardless of their geographical location.

I cannot speak to the case that Johann Lamont just described, but my view is that, if that person was in the catchment area, so to speak, of Aberdeen—I recognise that she wishes to live at home—we would be prepared to look at her case, as Professor Mahoney said.

Johann Lamont raised another point with which I agree. If we have a cap on the number of places, there needs to be restriction and, at the moment, using qualifications is the only way in which we can make decisions other than by using contextualised admissions, where appropriate, which the University of Aberdeen feels very passionately about—I know that other universities do, too.

Johann Lamont: That is exceptionally helpful. However, I say to Alastair Sim that we should not be relying on good practice by individual universities, such as the University of the West of Scotland, to make up our numbers. Is it reasonable to say to universities across the board that they should take the same approach and that a consideration of income should be part of a contextualised admission? Are you restricted by Government policy in doing that?

Alastair Sim: The university sector is determined to use indicators that make sense. That is why our admissions working group is looking at extending access beyond SIMD and care-experienced candidates and, across the sector, what indicators of disadvantage should be taken into consideration for admissions. For

instance, we are getting data from the Scottish Government on free school meals and education maintenance allowance entitlement, which might be more robust indicators. I can see the rationale for using income as an indicator, but there are problems in getting access to income data before people apply to university. A bit of systems thinking is needed before income can necessarily be used as an indicator. However, we need to look across the sector so that we have an intelligent range of indicators of disadvantage.

Johann Lamont: There is a related issue. A young person from a poorer background who wants to study medicine might get a place in Aberdeen but not in Glasgow, where they come from, and it might be impossible for them to take up that place because the costs are so high. Have the universities thought about that in relation to their contextualised offers for such courses?

Professor Diamond: I take your point that the issue is difficult. That is one reason why we have offered a year of free accommodation to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. We recognise that, although there are no tuition fees, it costs serious money to go to university. People are getting into debt to be there, and it is often credit card debt, which is bad debt. People are also working long hours in paid employment alongside their studies. We believe that that is not great, because we are passionate about the co-curriculum, about people engaging with everything about being at university and about people growing as active citizens. There are challenges, and dealing with them comes down to people having the money to enable them to live away from home.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have a brief question on admissions. The admissions process can be quite daunting, particularly for those who have no family background in higher education. Alastair Sim mentioned the improvements that strong contextualised admissions processes can produce in admissions outcomes. That is welcome, but it adds an extra layer to the process. What do your institutions do to ensure that your contextualised admissions policy is as understandable as possible for applicants whose background means that they could take advantage of that policy, and for the people who support them, such as school staff and family? How do we make sure that the extra layer of policy is clearly understood?

Professor Diamond: That is an incredibly—

The Convener: I should have said that all remarks need to come through me. I call Professor Diamond and then Professor Sharkey.

Professor Diamond: I am terribly sorry, convener. Through you, I say that the question is really important. It is incredibly important to recognise the amount of work that universities across Scotland do with schools.

The University of Aberdeen runs the access Aberdeen initiative, which works with a set of schools across north and north-east Scotland whose progression rates are lower than 30 per cent. We give people individual support on going to university and completing applications. With access to medicine, for example, medical students do practice interviews with intending medical students. We do everything that we can to give people a fair opportunity and to enable them to negotiate what is a challenging bureaucracy to deal with for the first time.

Professor Sharkey: We are an ensemble school, so everything that we do—whether it is an acting group, a dance group or an orchestra—involves people who must be able to work together. We want to engage early and raise aspiration early. The goal is to have not only access but access that leads to progression.

The conservatoire has a programme called transitions, which we are grateful to have Scottish funding council support for. It identifies primary school age young people in deprived areas who would benefit from music, dance, drama or production training. We work with and mentor them and we give them practice auditions, the goal being that, by the time they reach the age of 17 for dance or 18 for all the other things, they will be at the right level. Through Focus West, we work in a strong partnership with a number of schools in deprived areas to raise aspiration. That is all about discrete engagement early. We are continuing to work at getting better at that.

I return to a question from Johann Lamont. Like Sir Ian Diamond, I worry about the extreme focus on SIMD 20. That does not help us with our traditional music course, whose students come largely from rural deprived areas. We have a number of people from SIMD 40 areas in our transitions programme but, to be frank, we will have to winnow them out in order to keep focusing more on SIMD 20 and meeting the advanced targets. How measurement is done has consequences. Overall, we are after early access and progression.

Ross Greer: I have a brief supplementary question for Sir Ian Diamond. You mentioned working with schools in your area. I realise that there will be historical elements to that that go back a long way. Has that largely happened through the education authorities, or does the university as an institution engage on a school-by-school basis?

Professor Diamond: It happens in partnership with the education authorities, but within the

schools it is on a school-by-school basis. I am exaggerating slightly for effect, but I am passionate that we do not identify one school in a really disadvantaged area and find that every university in the area is supporting that school and not all the others.

We try to make sure that where we work our good friends at Robert Gordon University do not work so hard, but we make sure that people have the opportunity to choose a university, and that it is not a matter of simply coming to the University of Aberdeen.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I have a brief supplementary question, which is on what Professor Sharkey said.

You have mentioned going out to raise aspiration a couple of times. Do you agree that folk from deprived or less-fortunate backgrounds are prevented from going to university not by lack of aspiration but by the structural barriers that are in their way, such as the complexity of application processes or money issues?

Professor Sharkey: I agree. What we want to show is that people from any background—we are also interested in increasing ethnic diversity—can imagine themselves on that stage. We are trying to reach them earlier and say, "This could be really exciting; it could be for you."

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): Professor Sir Ian Diamond gazumped my question, which was about the use of the 20 per cent most-deprived areas in measuring the success of widening access. I welcome his comments on that.

To what extent are you able to go into rural areas and encourage people to apply to go to university? If I were to live in a very remote area, I would think of the transport difficulties, the expense of having to move to the city and pay for accommodation, and the hassle and obstacles in my way. How do you go out proactively into deprived areas that do not count as part of the 20 per cent to encourage people to apply in the first place?

Professor Diamond: That is one of the most important questions. Shetland, Orkney, Highland, Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen make up 46 per cent of the geography of Scotland but have only 17 per cent of the postcodes. Only 4 per cent of those postcodes are disadvantaged areas. We need our approach to be much broader.

I agree with Professor Sharkey that encouragement needs to be early. It cannot just be when people are in S4 that we say, "Hey, have you thought of doing university?" We are in schools for a long time, getting the aspirations up and making university seem like something that people can do.

I take Ruth Maguire's incredibly important points about bureaucracy and money. We work in schools and also run an access summer school. It is important to get people on to the university campus to know what it is like to be in a university environment. We say that, if people do well at that access summer school, which is for disadvantaged pupils, we will give them a place.

For people in places such as Turriff and Alford, we must recognise that this is about working with them and offering them the opportunity to come. I am proud that every year we get one or two people coming from places such as Kinlochshiel, which has only 65 pupils in its secondary school. They have enough aspiration to come to the University of Aberdeen and we are proud to welcome them.

It is important that, when people have made that journey, we do everything that we can as a university to welcome them and give them a sense of belonging early on. Widening access is great, but it is useless if it is accompanied by drop-outs. Widening access has to be about widening achievement.

I will say one more time that money is important to get the full benefits from higher education. A review that I did for the Welsh Government recommended a means-tested grant, which, for those from the most-disadvantaged backgrounds, was 30 weeks at 35 hours a week at the national living wage. That has been implemented by the Welsh Government, and through it you will see an increase in access by people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

10:15

Professor Mahoney: I will deal specifically with the final question and then work backwards to deal with previous comments.

As members probably know, the University of the West of Scotland has a footprint in Dumfries. That is generally a rural setting—apologies to Oliver Mundell—and we recruit widely from that area by doing all sorts of outreach activities.

A point was made that I want to reiterate. We recruit students from Stranraer who cannot arrive at the campus before 9 o'clock by public transport because of the restrictions on its availability. Therefore, we have accommodated that in our curriculum to allow those people to attend.

We do a lot of outreach work at our other campuses in the same way that Professor Diamond has just referred to. There are summer schools, for example. We run a NASA partnership programme every year in Renfrewshire, Clydebank and East Renfrewshire, which brings in more than 250 students to the university campus

to participate in an astronaut programme with experiments that eventually go into space. We do that because we know that breaking down barriers in relation to being on a university campus helps to widen access.

We are a partner in the children's university concept—indeed, I think that we are now the largest provider of children's university activity in Scotland—and we developed our own wee university last year. The purpose of that concept is for pre-school children to be involved in university access.

All those things attempt to break down the barriers to access so that university is seen as a natural progression for those who decide to get a qualification at that level.

Susan Stewart: Obviously, the Open University is unique, in that we do not require people to have any formal educational qualifications before they come to us. That means that pre-entry advice and guidance are critical in order to ensure that students choose the correct curriculum to maximise their chances of success.

On SIMD 20, I echo what my colleague said. Although our national figure is 17 per cent of students from SIMD 20 areas, a quarter of our students are from rural and remote Scotland. Often, they do not go full time to traditional campus universities because of some of the challenges that have been mentioned. However, 40 per cent of our students in Glasgow come from SIMD 20 areas. The picture is therefore variable.

On maintenance grants, although the review of student finance was interesting, we were disappointed that it chose not to deal with part-time students. The Welsh Government has dealt with them in the Diamond review. It has given part-time provision parity with full-time provision.

Professor Sharkey: We have been trying to pioneer digital work to reach the outer Hebrides and other places. I think that the committee saw a student from South Uist and a student from Islay, whom we engage with three weeks a month using the eStaccato programme, which uses Google Hangouts, so it is not too high end—it is possible to get to. That is pre-HE. They make the longer journey once a month. We have found that combination to be very effective in reaching more people.

The Convener: Google Hangouts might not sound high end to you, but it is a complete mystery to me.

Richard Lochhead: Perhaps there can be brief answers to my next question. The issue has been touched on in relation to maintenance grants. It is clear that people from deprived backgrounds will still have their challenges in life, which means that more support might have to be made available in the future once the targets have been reached. How has that been calculated? Am I correct in thinking that that is an issue? Has that been built into your response?

Professor Diamond: Do you mean the support when they get to university?

Richard Lochhead: Yes.

Professor Diamond: That is incredibly important, and we talk about it a lot. The first real evidence on that came from the University of Glasgow. It showed that, if extra support was given to people from disadvantaged backgrounds during the first semester, they would achieve at the same level as everybody after that. That extra support, which I first proposed in work that I did at the University of St Andrews in 1978, is incredibly important.

How is that paid for? It is paid for because people are committed to making it happen; there is no extra funding for it. However, giving that extra support is incredibly important. It is about giving people a sense of belonging and progression, and making them feel that they should be at the institution. The first semester is incredibly important, and we work very hard on that at the University of Aberdeen. That is not to say that many other universities across Scotland do not work very hard on it, too.

The Convener: We will soon find out.

Alastair Sim: The funding is wrapped up in the overall teaching grant for Scottish universities. The case that we make to the Scottish Government for sustainable funding of teaching at universities is that the money pays not only for teaching but for all the wraparound support and the extra work to ensure that people are supported to achieve their full potential at university—mental health support, extra pastoral care and so on. As we become more and more ambitious in relation to including a wider range of people from disadvantaged backgrounds, it becomes more important that our teaching is funded at a level that enables us to offer the best support that we can to people who, often, come from quite difficult backgrounds.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I have two questions, but I would like to sneak another one in on the back of what Richard Lochhead talked about.

The Convener: So, you have three questions.

George Adam: Well, two, plus a sneaky one.

Craig Mahoney has done a lot of work around supporting students because of concerns about the drop-out rate. What have been your successes, and what challenges have you faced?

Professor Mahoney: Thanks. You are a supporter of the university locally, and I am appreciative of your continued liaison with us.

As you probably know from your own data, the UWS does widening access very well. With regard to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, almost 30 per cent of our student body is composed of students from SIMD 20 backgrounds, and more than 50 per cent of our students come from SIMD 40 backgrounds. The university is proud of that and we continue to expand those numbers in an effort to ensure that we can transform lives in a way that we think is very effective.

In recent years, progression rates have been challenging. We have had students who have not completed the award that they came for. On the face of it, that looks like a failure, but we are quite clear that even students who experience only a modest amount of time at university and leave without a formal qualification are still transforming their lives. Often, we find that some of early exit students leave because they have found employment—they came to university to get a qualification but, if employment comes along, their sense of responsibility tells them that employment is more important than the qualification, so they jump. Only about 50 per cent of our students go on to do a final year and get an honours degree, and that is mainly because people find that they can get employment at the end of their third year with a pass degree.

With regard to retention, our drop-out rate has reduced by nearly 17 per cent over the past few years. In other words, we are keeping students in the system much more effectively than previously. That has come about through improving our systems; being more careful in relation to the students we encourage to come to university; making the right choices for them and us in allowing them on to courses; and ensuring that our induction programmes are finessed in a way that both enables students to create partnerships and friendships early on and enables us to explain to students the systems and structures of the university on their arrival, so that they are able to navigate the many complex pathways that exist in a university for anybody, regardless of their age.

We are also improving our in-house systems. Accordingly, we have created roles that are akin to the floor walkers in John Lewis, who ask if they can help when you come into the store. Following a pilot scheme, we now have staff whose responsibility it is to identify students who appear to be struggling, whatever form the difficulty takes—whether they are lost in the university or are struggling with finances or personal circumstances—so that we pick up on those issues more rapidly. We have also improved our personal tutor system, and there are various other systems and techniques that have been put in place. That has a cost, which ties in to the point that Alastair Sim made about the fact that the wraparound fee that we get covers many things, not just teaching.

Some years back, in response to a Government request, the university widened the numbers of students that it takes. In our portfolio of 18,800 students, we now have nearly 1,000 students who are called fees-only students. I am sure that that is a familiar term to you, but I will explain it in case it is not. It means is that we have 994 students in relation to whom the Government pays us £1,820, in comparison to an average fee for the remaining Scottish and European Union students of around £6,500. That creates a shortfall, if you like, of nearly £4.6 million in the income that is available for delivering support to our widening access work and to other students in the university. I am not complaining about that; I merely make that point to help you understand why UWS is doing what it is doing in the way in which it is doing it.

George Adam: My main question is linked to Craig Mahoney's comments. When we look at widening access, we are looking at bringing into universities people who do not have a family history of going to university. UWS has a specific way of doing that, and I know that the OU has a particular way of doing it. How do we engage with people and get them beyond the barrier of thinking that university is not for them? If a young person's mum and dad did not go to university and the support is not there, but they have the talent and the ability, what are the basic ways of accessing them and getting them into university?

Professor Diamond: That is exactly the right question, if I may say so, but there is no single answer. If there was a magic bullet, we would have fired it. The bottom line is that there is a mass of things that we have to do.

I talked about engagement with school pupils from an early stage and about bringing young people and their parents on to campus. Craig Mahoney talked about the children's university project, through which we bring young people on to campus at an early age with their parents and say, "You could be here, too. This is an opportunity for you."

People's ability to navigate the bureaucracy is also incredibly important, so a strategy is needed to help them with applications.

Critically, however—this goes back to the point that Liz Smith made at the beginning—the schools have to be engaged. Careers advisers in schools need to be saying to young people, "You could go to university." I was shocked 45 or 50 years ago, or whenever it was, when somebody at my school

said that I could go to university. We need to make that the norm.

My answer is that there is no magic bullet: we have to do everything that we have been talking about so far.

The Convener: We have a lot to get through, so I ask for answers to be much more succinct. Thank you.

Professor Mahoney: There are many examples. Professor Diamond said that we are all trying to do that work. My situation was similar to his: I went to university merely because my brother went and we were very competitive. There are lots of stories about people who were the first people in their family to go to university, and a huge number of graduates from UWS are in that position.

We need to ask ourselves what the purpose of universities is. People have different opinions about that, and the purpose is changing. Many people go to university because they are seeking a qualification that will transform their lives and enable them to enter a workforce in which they want to work, but we need to remain sensitive to the fact that there are many routes into work. Universities are not the only pathway to work—there is also direct entry and the FE colleges.

Johann Lamont: I want to pick up on something that Professor Mahoney said about financing, because I think I missed the point. You said that the Scottish Government asked your university to expand its number of students by 1,000 and that they are funded at £1,500 a head, and you then mentioned a figure, I think, of £6,000. Will you clarify that?

Professor Mahoney: Others will correct me if I get this wrong, but I think that the average fee that the Scottish Government pays is £6,500: most of our students bring with them a stipend of £6,500 from the Scottish Government. However, we have nearly 1,000 students for whom the Scottish Government pays us only £1,820—not £1,500, but £1,820. Those students are not identified. There is a difference between the fee that we get for most students and the fee that we get for a group of students who are funded at a lower rate.

The Government is seeking to widen access, and we are committed to that, so we took those numbers on and we continue to do that. All of us on the panel today will have fees-only students. The numbers will vary between institutions, and universities will decide whether that is something that they can sustain.

The Convener: We can try to get some other information on that.

George Adam: The OU model is completely different from everyone else's, as it is not a campus-based model. You have been breaking the barriers down for decades.

10:30

Susan Stewart: The OU is 50 years old next year—we have been reaching hard-to-reach students for five decades, so we have experience.

There is a multiplicity of approaches. For traditional universities, it is important that they start with people when they are young—in their early years. We would probably all agree that we need to get better at learning from the evidence that we have on what works in that area and, subsequently, at universalising our approach.

On that point, a unique learner number would help us all to track outcomes. In my institution, I am keen to know whether the YASS programme, which young people follow in sixth year, changes their aspirations with regard to which university they want to go to and what course they want to do. Critically, especially for students who come from schools that do not have a tradition of sending many people to university, we want to know whether the programme helps to improve first-year retention. I am pretty sure that it does, but it is very difficult to get the data from the universities because the YASS students tend to go to one of the 18 traditional universities in Scotland rather than coming to the OU.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I will ask about articulation. I have in front of me the recommendations from the commissioner for fair access. Panel members who know me will know that I was a college lecturer for many years, so articulation is a subject that is very close to my heart. I have seen many graduates of the course that I taught go to university and do extremely well, and then go on to have fulfilling careers, as a result.

George Adam mentioned the drop-out rate for people who come to university from school. I have questions in particular for the universities that have articulation programmes. In my first question, I am thinking about students who at school had not thought of themselves as potential university applicants, but who did a higher national diploma and have had the bridging experience of college. Have studies been done on whether such students have come into the university setting and managed to stay there because they had that bridging experience?

My second question is for Professor Diamond and Professor Mahoney, whose institutions run substantial articulation programmes. What are your responses to recommendations 15 and 16 from the commissioner for fair access, which are on taking on more HND students into second year—third year, which the recommendations do

not mention, is also an option—and building strong links with local colleges to facilitate that.

Alastair Sim: Perhaps I could make a general observation before my colleagues, who have much more practitioner experience, answer.

We have made a lot of progress in articulation, as our submission highlights, and we are committed to making more progress. Our national articulation forum, which is a joint project with Colleges Scotland, brings together multiple stakeholders, including the National Union of Students Scotland, to look at how we can drive articulation further. In particular, we are narrowing down to a range of subjects in which students are articulating without as much credit as we might expect. There are some subjects including business administration, maths, communication and engineering in which students are, in general, articulating with credit from the university. In other subjects, including biological studies, social studies and law, students are typically articulating without full credit. We want to drill down to find out the curricular reason for that, and to look at what is happening between the HND and the university curriculum that is making articulation more difficult, and at how we can fix that.

From a position of having a general commitment to articulation, we are trying to get into the nuts and bolts and look at how we can make some of the crunchy bits, which are not quite working yet, work better. I am sure that the practitioners will want to say something on that.

Professor Mahoney: I thank Gillian Martin for the question. I am happy to present the UWS perspective on that. As she identified, UWS articulates a number of students; the data suggests that there are 2,000 students articulating in the current year. As you will know, the university's footprint covers Paisley, Hamilton, Ayr and Dumfries and it works interactively with eight local FE providers in those areas to allow students to articulate on to our programmes.

Gillian Martin has raised a question that requires much wider discussion: how is what is essentially a recognition of prior learning, for which there is a national framework in Scotland, mapped against the curriculum that the universities offer? That is where a judgment must be made about the point at which a person is allowed to enter a course.

I am proud to say that UWS would typically, in most cases, allow a person with a higher national certificate to enter at level 8, which is second year, and with an HND to enter at level 9, which is third year. I know that not all universities do that. It is about mapping the curriculum from the student's previous award. If that shows a skills and knowledge gap compared with what is expected for a student who has progressed through university to that level, that deficit clearly needs to be made up. That can be done through summer programmes and various other entry processes. UWS is doing quite a lot of that. We are very proud of our relationship with the FE sector and we have been pretty successful at articulation.

Gillian Martin asked about the learner journey when people come to university. Undoubtedly, the intimacy of contact at an FE college is much more intense than it is in university, so students sometimes struggle with that element of a degree programme when they join a higher education institution. We have permanent college liaison officers who work with the students who are articulating into the university, so we take a great deal of care to give them the required skills, knowledge and experience, and we give them exposure to the university before they come in, which we hope enables them to have greater success. I cannot give you data on the success rate, but my understanding is that students who articulate to UWS do very well.

Professor Diamond: We now have 111 pathways with FE colleges. I should declare an interest in that I chair Edinburgh College's board of management, so you can invite me back to speak for FE later.

The Convener: Let us see how you do today.

Professor Diamond: Thank you.

I really have nothing to add to what Professor Mahoney has said, for the simple reason that the University of Aberdeen does much the same as what he described. For example, for students who come to us from Aberdeen's North East Scotland College to do engineering and articulate into third year, we put in a lot of effort to make sure that their mathematics is at the right level. There is work done at that intellectual level but, as Craig Mahoney has rightly said, there is also a social level, so we put a lot of effort into that, too.

I am also very impressed by the link between Forth Valley College and the University of Stirling. Students in the first two years of many HN courses at Forth Valley College spend a day a week studying at Stirling university. That is incredibly important, because it means that they get to know the campus—they get to know their way around and the types of studying from an early point. Also, they expect that they will be able to go to university if they want to. It is part of the pathway.

We have a lot to do. I personally believe passionately in articulation and articulating with full credit but, as I say, at the University of Aberdeen we are on an upward trend. We have very close links with a number of FE providers and we intend to increase those links.

Susan Stewart: The OU has articulation agreements with all 15 colleges in Scotland, apart from the colleges of the University of the Highlands and Islands—we have an agreement that we leave that to them. Almost 20 per cent of our students come in with HN qualifications, and they do much better than the general cohort—they tend to graduate with a better class of degree. We are also interested in talking to colleges and other universities about three-way partnerships, whereby students could start with an HN qualification from college, do a couple of modules with the OU and then take that credit to the universities that are more competitive in terms of their entry requirements. That is a model that we are keen to expand.

Gillian Martin: I am interested in another aspect. I have had conversations with university principals about there being greater partnership between universities and colleges in terms of sharing resources, which could be a way to bring college and university students together. Is that something that any of you have considered?

Professor Diamond: That is certainly a conversation that we have had. I think that that is the future, to be frank. The facilities at Edinburgh College are in some areas much better than the facilities at the University of Aberdeen, and vice versa. Therefore, it seems to me that that kind of partnership would be a good thing for the people in whom we are most interested—the learners.

Professor Mahoney: I absolutely support what Ian Diamond has just said. I will give examples from the UWS point of view. On the Crichton campus in Dumfries we share a number of things in partnership with the local FE provider: the library, for example, is hosted in their building but is run by my staff, and we provide library facilities for all five providers—HE and FE—that are located on the campus. That is an example of good practice, in my opinion, and one that works very successfully in allowing students in FE and HE to integrate regularly.

We are just about to open a partnership with West College Scotland on construction engineering, through which a facility that is located on its campus will be delivered and supported by our staff. Geography is a challenge sometimes, but we are keen to work in partnership with FE providers and to share resources—staff or facilities—wherever possible

Susan Stewart: The OU has no campus, but we have OU learning spaces in five colleges. They are designed to offer a physical space in which OU students can study, but they have also had the benefit that college students have seen their peers doing an OU degree and thought about doing that after their HN qualification.

Gillian Martin: Some people's perception is that the Open University is for adult learners or returner learners. What percentage of students are school leavers or other young people?

Susan Stewart: The OU's average student age in Scotland is 26, which is younger than people expect. The figure in Scotland is skewed slightly by our YASS students, but the average for the whole United Kingdom is 27, so it is not skewed much.

Gillian Martin: My final question is for Alastair Sim. Are universities on target to achieve the commission's recommendations 15 and 16, which are on articulation?

Alastair Sim: Yes—as long as the recommendations are understood intelligently. To the nearest percentage point, 58 per cent of people who articulate in the same subject area now articulate with full credit, so we are very much on a growth path towards that being the case for more people who articulate in the same subject area, and towards reaching the SFC target.

We also need to maintain space for people to change their subject completely between college and university. Changing subject means fundamentally changing the pathway, so it is not possible to bring the full credit from college. We need to facilitate people's ability to have learner journeys that are not as neatly linear as choosing a subject on entering college and pursuing it all the way through to a degree.

We need to protect people's ability to say that they are not ready for the third year in an honours degree and that their education journey would be better supported if they stepped back and went into university at an earlier stage. That is often the learner's choice because they think that it is the right way to achieve the best outcome for them.

We are on the path, but we must recognise that learners have a variety of choices and needs, which we must respect.

The Convener: Are you saying that you are confident that you will achieve the targets, but you might not achieve them because of actions by students?

Alastair Sim: The answer depends on how we understand the targets. The commission's target was for 75 per cent of HN students to articulate with full credit, which makes sense for articulation in the same subject area. However, we must take learners who change subjects out of the target, as the Scottish Government's learner journey review report of last week acknowledged, because a person who completely changes their subject area cannot go into the first year of honours—third year—at university. Taking them into something

for which they are not prepared for success would not do them a favour.

The Convener: I think that that has been taken into account in the targets.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Is there evidence that the cap on funded places is squeezing out some applicants? Do we understand yet what the cap means?

Alastair Sim: My personal impression is that the issue is an incipient problem rather than a current major problem. The data in our submission on increases in the number of entrants to university broadly show growth in the number of people who come from the most deprived quintile and relative stability in the number of people from other quintiles. That is not an unreasonable picture.

For the future, we look towards achieving the targets that we all aspire to for 2030. As universities increase recruitment from the most deprived parts of the community, they also want to protect their ability to recruit from all the other quintiles, many of which are also displaying characteristics of disadvantage.

10:45

Tavish Scott: Because of the cap policy, you cannot square that circle.

Alastair Sim: Over the period to 2030, the universities are saying that, to achieve such access, it is reasonable to look for growth in the number of funded places so that we can be fair to everybody, which is what we want to be.

Tavish Scott: That means more money from the Government.

Alastair Sim: That means more funded places. We have an opportunity after Brexit if some of the money shifts because we have a different profile of EU students.

Tavish Scott: If there is no more money, there are no more funded places, unless there is another way to fund them. There will be a squeeze.

Alastair Sim: Yes. Although we wish to maintain our openness to EU students in the future, and although they are important to many of our subject areas and our skills pipeline, there will be a rebalancing between Scotland-domiciled and EU students. That releases an opportunity to widen access, while being fair to everybody else.

Tavish Scott: What does "a rebalancing" mean? Which group gets less and which group gets more?

Alastair Sim: I would expect there to be fewer EU-domiciled undergraduates in the system after the Brexit transition period, although we will still maintain our openness to a sustainable number of them.

Tavish Scott: We had better not debate Brexit. We did that yesterday at some length.

Lucy Hunter-Blackburn's research for the period 2010 to 2016 for 18-year-olds' applications and acceptances suggests that the group that is most at risk of displacement is young people in the middle quintiles. Do you accept that?

Alastair Sim: The commissioner himself made similar remarks.

Tavish Scott: He did.

Alastair Sim: As we look at which categories of the population are finding that their applications to university are more likely to be accepted, we see that the most privileged quintile continues to do well. Those from the least privileged quintile are increasingly finding it at least possible to get into university and their application success is right up there with the norm.

There is some evidence of a relative squeeze on the middle but, as I said at the beginning—

Tavish Scott: I have plenty of anecdotal evidence from mums and dads in supermarkets telling me that it is happening. Headteachers are telling me that it is happening as well. Given that it is dealing with the offering at the moment, the university sector must have masses of data about how many young people are applying and then getting in or not getting in. You must have a pretty decent feel for what is now happening.

Professor Diamond: Yes, we do for our university. Although I fully agree with Alastair Sim about the overall picture, at the University of Aberdeen there are many subjects that we would like to take more students on for, for which there are well-qualified Scottish students who would be able to come, but we do not have the space for them. When we sadly say that we do not have the space, which is difficult for us, I cannot tell you whether they go to other universities in Scotland to study the subject that they really wish to study, whether they go to other universities in Scotland for a subject that is their second or third choice or whether they are pushed either into England or out of university.

Tavish Scott: That is a big gap in our understanding of what is happening. How would you improve that understanding? What about the point that Susan Stewart made about the learner number? Would giving everyone an identification number help?

Alastair Sim: We want to be able to trace what happens to every learner through the system, right from school, through college and university and

into employment. We could then do the fairly sophisticated analysis of the patterns that lead people to success right through the education system and into employment.

Professor Diamond: I am passionate about this. Scotland is one of the best places in the world for research on linked administrative data. The University of Edinburgh and my colleagues are just brilliant. Given that that skill exists, it is not impossible to use the kind of approach that Susan Stewart has suggested to link data—for example, to come back to where we started today, data on income—so that we can properly understand all the questions that you are rightly asking.

Tavish Scott: Would it be fair to ask the commissioner to bring us some evidence once he has had the opportunity to discuss with your sector what is actually happening, so that we can understand the unintended consequences of the policy?

Professor Diamond: Yes.

Liz Smith: I will pursue the theme that Tavish Scott has been exploring. Professor Diamond, you said very publicly last year that you were frustrated that you could not accept more medical undergraduates, particularly at a time of problems in the recruitment of general practitioners. In an ideal world, you would like to take on more very well-qualified Scotland-domiciled students who have an interest in a medical career. Should the Government pursue a policy, as it has done in recent times, of increasing the cap for specific areas in which there is a dearth of the places that you would like to offer, or is a fundamental review of the structure of higher education funding required?

Professor Diamond: Thank you very much for that very interesting question. One of the most difficult things that I do is receive letters from MSPs—some of you might have written to me in the past—with cases of constituents who have unbelievably good higher qualifications and would like to be a doctor, for example, but who are 1 or 2 percentage points below a line, even given the contextual admissions that we offer.

The University of Aberdeen has a fantastic record of training doctors who subsequently work in Scotland, and we would love to be able to increase our numbers, as medical students are a particular case. As you will know, we have just started a wonderful programme for widening access, which the Scottish Government has supported very well. Students, who are all from disadvantaged backgrounds, do a year at North East Scotland College, and they are all doing very well. They have been supported fully and I am sure that almost all of them—I hope, all of them—will become doctors in a few years' time. It is a fantastic programme, and we would love to expand it.

Do we need to expand the number of medical students? That would be a very good thing and the University of Aberdeen would be delighted to take more students. The question is then whether we need a fundamental review of higher education funding. I have just done a review for the Welsh Government, and an enormous amount of interesting information came out it. That review has really impacted on policy in Wales, which is exciting for not only full-time students but part-time students. It is for the elected representatives on this committee to decide whether you feel such a review would be useful for Scotland. Should you decide that it would be, I would be delighted to help in any way I could.

Liz Smith: That was a very helpful answer. Would you remove the cap?

Professor Diamond: I have said for many years that I believe fundamentally in the Robbins principle from the 1960s that everyone who has the ability to go to university, and wishes to do so, should be able to.

Alastair Sim: The corollary of removing the cap is that we would need to fund each place following that expansion of university places. If we simply remove the cap, we compound the problem that Craig Mahoney expressed of expecting more students to be taught for the same amount of money. While fully supporting the Robbins principle, we should recognise that, as well as removing the cap being a political choice, there would be a political choice in deciding whether the funding for each student in an expanding system should be sufficient to enable us not only to teach students but to support them with everything that they would need to graduate successfully, including pastoral support.

Professor Diamond: I want to make the point that FE has a clear role in teaching HE.

The Convener: I am glad that Professor Mahoney and Professor Diamond have brought up the role of FE.

Ruth Maguire: Before we move on to my main question, I want to say that we have heard great evidence today of the good work that is going on. However, there is clearly a disparity between the success rates of different universities in Scotland. Do you accept that it is time for some other institutions to do a little bit more and work a little bit harder on widening access? If so, what would you have them do and when would you have them do it by?

Alastair Sim: Others might wish to comment on what their institutions are doing, but I can speak generally about the issue. Genuinely, every

institution is working extremely hard on this issue. Obviously, the most selective institutions are facing the biggest challenge in the sense that relatively few learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are presenting with a really strong set of highers. However, that is being recognised through contextual admissions and outreach programmes—such as the University of Edinburgh's educated pass programme that works with kids through football—that get right down into schools and say to pupils that there are real opportunities for them at university and that they have an opportunity to aspire to attend a very selective university.

Everyone has examples of such programmes and every institution, including the most select, is looking at what more it can do on articulation to ensure that people have pathways from college to the most selective universities.

There is no lack of commitment. There is an issue around the fact that, if you are running a highly selective university or a highly selective course, your pool of qualified candidates, even when you apply selective admissions, is smaller than it is if you are running a university or course that is less selective.

Ruth Maguire: Earlier, you mentioned that you are looking at the language around all of that. If I am cynical, when I hear that institutions are "looking at" something, it strikes me as a little bit woolly, and I always want to know what they are doing and when they are doing it.

Alastair Sim: There is a lot of doing in the programmes that are out there trying to promote aspiration and realistic achievement to ensure that people are able to get into the most selective universities.

On the practicalities, work is being done on the language that is used with the target of getting new language into the prospectuses that are published in spring 2019. When you look at the language about admissions across all universities, you see that it is all accurate, but some of it is not particularly learner friendly. We have a task group that is drawing on learner experience and also on the expertise of the Plain English Campaign in order to simplify the language that we use so that what we communicate to learners and advisers is comprehensible and can be understood by them rather than what seems appropriate to communicate from our perspective. That project is under way.

Ruth Maguire: So, you are waiting for the next prospectus to be printed rather than doing something just now. Am I picking you up wrong?

Alastair Sim: The next prospectuses that will be published are the ones that we will publish in early 2019. They are what will inform the next round of applications, and we want to ensure that those prospectuses use much clearer language about admissions, picking up on the point that has been made to us many times by this committee and many other people that, although what we express might be accurate, it is not necessarily that easy for learners or advisers to understand.

Ruth Maguire: My next question concerns the equally safe strategy toolkit. As a parent, and from the point of view of a corporate parent, I was delighted to see that launched. Professor Diamond talked about the importance of the first semester, and the strategy is designed to tackle the unacceptable levels of harassment and, in some cases, abuse that have been encountered by some women. Part of that toolkit involves support information for students, and we are told that it will be well publicised. How will you publicise it, and when will that be done? Will young women who are starting university this year receive that information?

Professor Diamond: I would say that they will receive that information this year. The big question is how they will receive it. Again, there is no magic bullet. The sorts of things that we will be doing include providing information in halls of residence so that, when someone arrives there, they get the relevant leaflets. We also have people providing early support in halls of residence when students arrive—most of our first-year students stay in halls; I will come back to those who do not in a moment. We provide support through freshers week and advise tutors to raise the issue and ensure that people are aware of it. We have an online health and safety course that students have to do in their first year. We also provide outreach support through the students association. There is not one answer. We take multiple approaches at various levels to ensure that no one falls through a crack.

11:00

Ruth Maguire: Is that approach mirrored across the institutions in Scotland?

Professor Mahoney: Yes.

The Convener: We have two principals here who say that the approach is mirrored, Mr Sim, but is it mirrored across the whole university sector?

Alastair Sim: Yes. The bar has been raised and the expectation is that we are all addressing the issue effectively. The University of Strathclyde gender-based violence toolkit is now part of what outcome agreements expect universities to do to address gender-based violence. It is now being universalised across the sector.

The Convener: I have a constituency interest in the issue because Emily Drouet's parents are

constituents of mine. Can you assure me that every student will get a card or something that has contact details so that they know who they can contact if anything happens that is similar to what happened in young Emily's dreadful case?

Alastair Sim: We are working on the text for that card at the moment.

The Convener: Is that a yes?

Alastair Sim: Yes. We are getting on with it.

The Convener: It is quite a simple thing. Can you confirm that you are guaranteeing that every student will be given a card with contact details for the police, social security, Rape Crisis or whoever it needs to be?

Alastair Sim: Can I just check and write back to you on that? We have made a very clear commitment that staff will get a first responder card. We are working with NUS Scotland. I would like to be able to write to you with the exact commitment that we have made, rather than telling you something that might be inaccurate. We have worked closely with Emily Drouet's parents and we are committed to addressing it.

The Convener: I appreciate that. It would be a hole in the system if you gave details about who to contact to staff members but not to the people who were first affected by the issue. I would appreciate it if you came back to the committee with the details on that as soon as possible.

Alastair Sim: Yes, of course.

Gillian Martin: I recognise that this is a sensitive area and we have all been affected by what happened to Emily Drouet. In the light of what happened, will universities be looking at how they respond and what mechanisms they have in place to deal with the perpetrators of gender-based violence? The universities have power at their disposal to make it clear to young men—or anyone—that gender-based violence will not be tolerated by an institution and that perpetrators might face being thrown out of university.

Professor Mahoney: All universities have clear disciplinary processes in place. Prohibition of violence of any sort is clearly articulated in all the universities that I have ever worked in—I imagine that my colleagues in other institutions in Scotland have similar processes in place. Rest assured, the university sector is absolutely committed to ensuring that people feel safe, no matter what their background, gender, sexual orientation or ethnicity, when they come to study at university.

However, we are societies, and in societies sometimes things fall short of what we would like. I can assure you that in my university—and I am sure that it is the same here—disciplinary actions will be taken against staff and students who do the wrong thing.

Gillian Martin: Will it be made clear from the get-go that gender-based violence will not be tolerated and will there be a clear message given to all new students about the consequences, so that they are obvious to them?

Professor Mahoney: I do not know how to answer that question because there are a number of obligations that we have to students and staff when they come to a university. It is part of a package of expectations, which includes a lack of tolerance for violence in any form. However, there are many other parts to that package of expectations, such as misappropriation, use of language and so on. I am cautious about saying yes because you are picking a very specific point. All universities have a charter and a relationship with their student body that sets out the expectations that the university has of students and the expectations that students should have of the university.

To return to the question that the convener asked, within that, there is a set of characteristics and we make sure that new students joining the university each year have access to that. Whether they read them and whether a card is the right mechanism to do it, is a different matter. I am not sure how we legislate for that.

The Convener: I completely accept what you say, but it has to be something for the student—not for a member of staff—and it becomes their responsibility. The other thing is that, if there is evidence of abuse and the abuser is known—even if it has not got to the stage of criminal proceedings—for the safety of the student involved, there must be a mechanism at the university whereby, even if there is not enough evidence to kick the abuser out, you can make sure that the student is not taught in the university but by distance learning at home or whatever. There is no way that a victim should have to face her abuser while something is going on. That has happened in universities, but it should never happen. I hope that that comes out of the discussions that the universities are having just now as you work closely on the issue.

Are you finished, Ruth?

Ruth Maguire: Yes. That is fine.

The Convener: I am going to bring in Mary Fee, but I have one very brief point to make. We talked about contextualised admissions and articulation. There seem to be disparities in how universities deal with that process and, to a great extent, those disparities seem to be between the moderns and the ancients. What are the ancients doing about that? It is all right saying that more people want to go to a particular university, but the ancients

surely have the same responsibility to society as the other universities, such as the University of the West of Scotland.

Professor Diamond: I am sorry, but I have to disagree with you.

The Convener: On which part? That they do not have the same responsibility to society?

Professor Diamond: No, no—not at all. We are doing everything that we can. We have contextual admissions, which we have had for a long time, and we take the process very seriously. As I have said, only 4.7 per cent of the postcodes in our catchment are disadvantaged areas, yet more than 5 per cent of our entrants last year, even on those criteria, came from those areas. We have enormous numbers of other students from disadvantaged backgrounds and areas, and we have given them contextual admissions and all the support that I have talked about.

Looking at other ancient universities, it was a big statement that the principal of the University of St Andrews rose to the challenge of leading our working group on widening access. She is doing everything that she can to push the University of St Andrews in that direction. With respect, it is unfair to say that the ancients are not taking the process seriously.

The Convener: I did not say that they were not taking it seriously, but the statistics show that they have not got to where the other universities are. Therefore, there is still much more to be done to level the playing field. It suggests that there are plenty of students who want to come to the ancient universities, so it is easier for them not to try.

Professor Diamond: No—that is not the case at all. There are, however, some aspiration issues. I will give you an example. I was recently in a school in Torry, which is in one of the poorer areas of Aberdeen, where I gave a speech and had a really nice conversation with secondary 5 and S6 pupils afterwards. One young woman came up to me and said that she really wanted to study law but that people from her school did not go to the University of Aberdeen. I said that that was absolute rubbish, and I more or less took her to the University of Aberdeen. We have to get into the schools as well as do the work that we are doing so that everybody in our target schools thinks that they can come to the University of Aberdeen. We need to make that the norm.

The Convener: Professor Diamond, do not take my question personally; it was about the ancients as a whole. I accept that there might be special circumstances around the University of Aberdeen because of the geography.

Professor Diamond: I know, and I am with you—we still have to make a journey. At the same time, however, it is about not just the universities but the schools.

The Convener: I accept that. Everybody has to go on that journey.

Alastair Sim: Speaking on behalf of the sector as a whole, I would add that there is genuinely a very strong commitment from the ancients. As Ruth Maguire said, work is being done and there is a wide range of programmes. For instance, the University of St Andrews has a specially tailored programme for people who come from widening access backgrounds to study physics and astronomy. They are not expected to come with the level of attainment that highly coached students from schools in privileged areas may come with. A lot of work is being done, and I think it would be helpful if I wrote to the committee and set out some of that. Work is also in hand to review what all the universities, including the ancients, are doing to promote articulation.

Returning to a point that I made in response to Ruth Maguire, when we are dealing with the most selective courses, there is an additional level of challenge in widening access because of the typically lower average attainment levels of people who come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. Serious work is needed to help people to realise their full potential and to recognise that when it is not fully evident from exam results, which poses an extra degree of challenge for the most selective courses.

The Convener: It would be helpful to get that information, as well as a timetable for when you hope to achieve what you are setting out to achieve, rather than just a statement that the universities are looking to do that at some stage in the future.

Professor Mahoney: To pick up on the point that you have just been discussing, it is unfair to distinguish as you did. I think that all universities—we work together very closely—are doing the best that they can to widen access. We should also be careful about trying to homogenise the system. The university system in Scotland is a very successful system of higher education that is recognised throughout the world, and it is very capable.

You could look at my university and say, “How come you’re not doing much research?” We are not a research-led university; we are a teaching-led university with research that is world class but small. I think that homogenising the system, although I know you are not saying that—

The Convener: Professor Mahoney, nobody is talking about homogenising the system.

Professor Mahoney: Can I just finish? I know that you were not talking about homogenisation,

but that is the risk that is presented by having the global argument and saying that we must all have a minimum of 20 per cent of our students from the SIMD 20. If we are going to look at that, I am failing seriously on widening access, because I have no SIMD 80 students.

The Convener: That is an interesting take on it, but nobody is saying that that is what we are looking for. We are saying that every university should be within the grasp of every child who can achieve the qualifications.

Professor Mahoney: Ian Diamond made the point that, if a student wants to access higher education, we are all committed to getting them in.

The Convener: Let us hope that, if we have a discussion here in a year's or two years' time, the statistics are much more equal than they are just now.

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I have two brief questions and a specific question for Susan Stewart. My questions are about retention. A lot of the issues that I wanted to raise have been covered, but I wonder what analysis and follow-up you do when a young person, particularly from the SIMD 20, leaves university. Is there an opportunity for them to drop out and come back in? Can they change how they learn for a time if they need to drop out to do something else, either with family or because of a particular issue? You do not need to give me a huge amount of detail. If you have examples, I would appreciate it if you could share them with the committee. However, a yes or no answer, or a very brief answer, would suffice.

Alastair Sim: The practitioners will be able to give the most insight on that, but I will give a bit of statistical background. When we look at the statistics for people who discontinue courses, we find that at least some of them come back. About 15 per cent come back into the same institution—

Mary Fee: Do they come back in at the point at which they left or at the start of the course?

Alastair Sim: Typically, they come back at the point at which they left.

Just under 12 per cent go into different institutions. As Professor Mahoney said, some people leave university because they have got a good job that they want to do, and that is their choice. However, we need to take the matter seriously. If someone stops their studies for reasons that are not good and because things just are not working out for them, we need to engage with them to find out why that is the case and how we can best support them to continue in higher education.

My colleagues who are practitioners will have more insight.

11:15

Susan Stewart: The Scottish funding council funded the OU to lead a project called back on course, which worked with all participating universities in Scotland when people had left a course early. The report will be out in the summer, but there are three initial findings. First, collectively, we need to offer much more advice and guidance when someone is starting university. Secondly, early exit is not just a first-year issue but happens subsequently, too. Thirdly—and importantly—the majority of students who leave early would like to return to study in the future, although not necessarily on the same course, because the subject choice has often been the mistake, and not necessarily at the same institution. We will ensure that the committee gets a copy of that report when it comes out in the summer.

Mary Fee: That would be helpful.

Susan Stewart: At the OU, learner journeys are not linear. People step out—I think that that is a better phrase than "stop out". I am not sure that the commissioner had ever been to Glasgow when he wrote about stopping out.

Professor Sharkey: People do return, and we have bespoke learner agreements. We are lucky that we are a small school with a lot of individual inputs including a major teacher, a centre for voice instruction and someone who teaches dance. Those people can keep an eye on the students, so our retention rate is good across the whole sector, but we will allow someone to return.

Mary Fee: Has there been any impact on students—particularly those from SIMD 20 areas—of the move from bursaries to loans?

Alastair Sim: I am not aware of any evidence that has linked that move to the drop-out rate. Nevertheless, I was on the panel that developed the proposals for an improved student support regime, and we realised that financial stress—whether or not it is linked to specific policy changes—is one of the key drivers of people discontinuing their studies. We therefore recommended a minimum quantified amount of money per year for students. We are waiting for the Scottish Government to respond in full to that proposal, because it raises some interesting issues in relation to the benefits system, which need to be teased out. It is important that students at least have access to an adequate package of support, even if it is based on a balance between bursary and loan.

Mary Fee: My final question is for Susan Stewart. As you said, people can drop in and drop out of the Open University. Because of how they learn, they can take a degree course over a much longer period, and concerns have been raised in

the past few months about financial constraints on the Open University across the UK. Is that reflected in Scotland as well, or is there a different position in Scotland?

Susan Stewart: Uniquely, the Open University has a footprint in all four nations of the UK, which gives economies of scale in terms of curriculum choice. The pattern is very different north and south of the border. In Scotland, our student numbers have grown, year on year, since 2014—so much, in fact, that we are now recruiting 27 per cent more than our funded places, which is interesting. In England, of course, there was a change to the model of higher education funding and student support in 2012, and there was a disproportionate falling off in part-time student numbers. David Willetts, the minister who was the architect of that policy, is on record as saying that he regrets the policy, that those circumstances were unforeseen and that he regards it as a mistake, because older students have more commitments, such as mortgages and work, and they tend to be more debt averse.

The OU's student numbers have dropped south of the border, and we are addressing that. You may have seen media reports about that. However, I am confident that curriculum choice for students in Scotland will in no way be restricted and that we will continue to provide a first-class experience for students in Scotland. I think that we are the only university in Scotland for which the national student survey has found more than 90 per cent student satisfaction every year, and I intend to keep it that way.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I want to ask about student support and finance. Do you think that the current levels of student support are insufficient?

Professor Mahoney: The answer is probably yes. Students experience challenges in their learning journeys, not just in Scotland but across the UK and in most modern higher education environments. I am sure that anything that we could do to improve that situation would be welcome.

Alastair Sim: I have no doubt that Susan Stewart will comment on part-time students. In the limited time that it had, the student support review recommended that full-time students should be entitled to £8,100 a year as a combination of bursary and loan. We thought that that was a reasonable level of support. We also recommended special measures for students who were estranged from their parents, for instance. That would recognise circumstances of disadvantage that are not tackled by the normal entitlement.

Susan Stewart: We want parity for part-time students. That is especially important for widening participation and access, because a far higher proportion of disadvantaged students, such as students with disabilities and those from SIMD 20 areas, study part time for a variety of reasons. We firmly believe that part-time study should have parity with full-time study in whatever maintenance, loan or bursary system we come up with.

Oliver Mundell: The witnesses have talked about the support that is on offer once students get to university. I asked the question because I know from conversations with young people in schools in my constituency that they decide even whether to apply to university on the basis of whether that would be financially sustainable for them. The cost can put those from more deprived backgrounds off applying altogether, so a group of qualified people are deciding not to go to university. Is that assessment fair?

Alastair Sim: I recognise the reality that people are concerned about the debt that they might accumulate for their maintenance while they are at university.

Oliver Mundell: Such people think that they cannot afford to live on the money that is available.

Alastair Sim: The student support review recommended an amount of money related to the national living wage, which we thought was a fair amount for a student to live on.

It needs to be much better explained that repayments are income contingent. We recommended a reasonable income threshold of £22,000 per year—the figure has since gone up to £25,000 in England—before people start to repay their student debt. A much better explanation—possibly from the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and the Student Loans Company—is needed to show that the loan element of maintenance is repayable at a reasonable rate over a long period and only when income goes above a threshold. I wish that that were better understood, because the maintenance and support regime should not be an obstacle to people from challenged backgrounds going to university.

Oliver Mundell: I hugely support the work that the University of the West of Scotland does in Dumfries, which works really well. However, in Professor Mahoney's experience, do some people choose to study at that institution in Dumfries or at other campuses because that allows them to stay at home, although they might study at different campuses of that university or other institutions if different finance was available?

Professor Mahoney: That is a good question, and the answer is broadly yes. Scotland-domiciled students at UWS travel an average of no more than 10 miles to come to one of our campuses, so we recruit a large number of locally domiciled students. If they could afford to go to or had access to a different university, they might choose to go there.

That relates to a point that I made earlier. Scotland has a diversity of higher education institutions—19 of them—that are doing very good jobs. I lead a university that I am proud to work in, and I am proud of what we achieve. However, the university is found towards the bottom rather than the top of newspaper ranking tables in the UK, so people have perceptions—I am sure that some are held by people in this room—about what that means in comparison with other universities.

Oliver Mundell referred to the Crichton campus. The University of the West of Scotland is the largest provider of HE in Dumfries, but most people know that the University of Glasgow has a footprint there, although it does nowhere near the amount of work that we do. That demonstrates what I am saying.

UWS does a great job of transforming people's lives and getting people into employment that they would not otherwise have got into. We are now exploring our alumni with depth and integrity. The information dates back quite a number of years and shows that we have more than 70,000 graduates, many of whom are high-net-worth individuals who have done fantastic things.

Which university someone goes to does not matter; they have to make the difference with the qualification themselves, in their lives. I would like us to promote every institution in Scotland in the same way.

The Convener: I thank the panel very much for a good evidence session, and I thank everyone for their attendance.

11:25

Meeting continued in private until 11:53.

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