



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 2 September 2020

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

19th Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Richard Lochhead (Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science)

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Gary Cocker

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 2 September 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Interests

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the 19th meeting in 2020 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone present to turn mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

We have received apologies from Rona Mackay MSP. We are joined by Gil Paterson MSP, who is substituting for Ms Mackay.

There has been a change in committee membership. I put on record our thanks to Gail Ross for her work as a member of the committee. We wish her well in her new parliamentary duties.

We welcome to the committee for the first time Kenneth Gibson. Under item 1, I invite him to declare any relevant interests.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I have none to declare.

The Convener: Thank you.

I remind everybody who is dialling in remotely to wait just a few seconds for the microphones to activate.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:31

The Convener: Item 2 is a decision on taking item 6 in private, to allow members to discuss the evidence that is taken today. As no member objects, we agree to take item 6 in private.

Subordinate Legislation

Abertay University and Robert Gordon University (Change of Names) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Order 2020 [Draft]

09:31

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of a draft affirmative instrument; information about the draft order is provided to members in paper 1. Under item 3, members have an opportunity to ask questions of the minister and his officials—although the minister is on his own today. We will then turn to item 4 for a debate on the motion on the instrument.

I welcome Richard Lochhead MSP, the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, and I invite him to make an opening statement to explain the draft order.

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): It is a pleasure to join the committee again. It seems quite a while since we met, given the extraordinary circumstances of the past few months.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the committee about the draft Abertay University and Robert Gordon University (Change of Names) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Order 2020. The draft order will amend three pieces of legislation to reflect the recent changes of name by what was formerly the “University of Abertay, Dundee” to “Abertay University”, and what was formerly “The Robert Gordon University” to “Robert Gordon University”.

The changes of name have already taken legal effect; the draft order will simply amend other legislation to refer to the institutions by their new names. It is quite a technical issue. Nevertheless, the committee may find it helpful to understand the background to the organisations’ name changes.

Abertay University took the decision to change its name from the “University of Abertay, Dundee” to “Abertay University” as it had been widely referred to and operating as Abertay University for some time. In accordance with section 49 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, approval for the name change was received from the Privy Council on 6 February 2019. The legal change of name was effected as part of the Abertay University (Scotland) Order of Council 2019. The change has been in force since 1 September 2019.

Robert Gordon University changed its name from “The Robert Gordon University” to “Robert Gordon University” earlier this year. It was

commonly referred to as “Robert Gordon University”, which caused confusion and made the university difficult to find in alphabetical lists of higher education institutions—which, I am told, the whole world refers to. Approval for the name change was received from the Privy Council on 9 November 2018. The legal change of name was effected as part of The Robert Gordon University (Scotland) Order of Council 2019. The change has been in force since 1 January 2020.

With the two new names now in force, the purpose of this affirmative instrument is to update references to those institutions in the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005, the Protection of Charities Assets (Exemption) (Scotland) Order 2006 and the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000 (Economy, efficiency and effectiveness examinations) (Specified Bodies etc) Order 2010. If approved, those modifications will come into force on 25 September.

I will do my best to answer any questions that members have. As you have heard, the issue is largely technical, but we are formally obliged to be here under the legislative process.

The Convener: As there are no questions for the minister, we move to item 4. I invite the minister to move motion S5M-22552.

Motion moved,

That the Education and Skills Committee recommends that the Abertay University and Robert Gordon University (Change of Names) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Order 2020 [draft] be approved.—[Richard Lochhead]

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: The committee must report to Parliament on the instrument. Are members content for me, as the convener, to sign off that report? I see that all members, including those who are joining us from home, agree.

Further and Higher Education: Impact of Covid-19

09:36

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is our main item of business and is evidence from the minister on the impact of Covid-19 on further and higher education. As I said, the minister is here today without officials, and I invite him to make a brief opening statement.

Richard Lochhead: Thank you. I was relieved that there were no questions on the previous agenda item, but we are about to discuss an important, meaty subject, and I look forward to an exchange of views and questions from the committee on the issue. I thank the committee for the invitation to appear before it today.

When we last met, in May, much of our discussion focused on the stability of our college and university sectors, and today we meet as our colleges and universities prepare for the new term. In the coming days and weeks, record numbers of Scotland's young people will start university and many more their journey through college—indeed, many of our colleges are already up and running. For those young people and their families, this is an incredibly exciting time and is perhaps one that, in May, we might not have imagined would even be possible.

So many of the opportunities that are usually available to our young people have been curtailed. They have seen life turned upside down. In some cases, exams have been cancelled, summer holidays have been scrapped, music festivals have been suspended and leisure and other activities have been cancelled—the list goes on—in what are extraordinary and challenging times for our young people. I am therefore delighted that our institutions can be opened to receive students at the start of this exciting milestone in their lives.

It is time to support our young people, who want to get on with the next chapter in their lives and gain the benefit of a Scottish college or university education. This is an appropriate time to acknowledge the tenacity of our young people and their parents, families and carers, and of our institutions, which, after switching to online education last term, have continued to work flat out to make our campuses safe for the new term. As a result of that hard work, we are now well placed to receive thousands of students for the new academic year, including those who have recently received their Scottish Qualifications Authority results.

At a time when some analysts are forecasting unprecedented levels of youth unemployment, we

are set to see record numbers of Scottish students in university, and we guarantee that no one is crowded out of a university or college place in academic year 2020-21. Most important, we have committed to fully funding those additional places this year and for the duration of those courses through to 2023-24 and even up to 2024-25.

Although there is continuing uncertainty over numbers, Scotland continues to be an attractive destination for international students seeking one of the best higher education experiences anywhere in the world. Due to Covid, there remain significant challenges, but we are cautiously optimistic that the fall in the number of overseas students that was originally predicted may not materialise. We still see a challenge, but, compared with where we were a few months ago, we now have some grounds for optimism that the eye-watering figures that we heard about will perhaps not materialise, which is encouraging news. Some international students might arrive later or begin with online learning at home, but I hope that significant numbers of international students will return to study in Scotland, and it is important that we make them feel welcome.

Much of the student experience will, of course, be radically different from that in previous years. We are still in the midst of a global pandemic so, as well as being excited and a little nervous about the new term, students and their families will no doubt be a little anxious. Safety is clearly an essential element of the new academic year. There will be some new constraints, including social distancing, blended learning and the wearing of face coverings. I am pleased to say that quarantine and testing protocols are being put in place across our institutions.

This year, freshers week might be more of an online experience and a more sober affair compared with the jam-packed freshers fairs that usually take place when students first arrive at college or university. I know that everyone is working hard to ensure that new students enjoy their rite of passage, however different that might look and feel.

We are focused on the continued wellbeing of our students. Together with the Scottish Funding Council, we are recruiting even more counsellors in our institutions, and we are extending the think positive campaign, which is NUS Scotland's mental health support project.

With the support of the sectors, our unions, skills agencies and public bodies, the work to prepare for the new academic year has not stopped. Together, we continue to deal with the impact of Covid across a number of fronts.

As the committee is aware, we announced funding of £75 million to help Scottish universities

protect their research and innovation base. Subsequently, we published “Supporting Scotland’s Colleges and Universities: Coronavirus (COVID-19)—Further and Higher Education Sustainability Plan”, which brought together the different elements of support that we have announced so far.

We provided an extra £5 million of student support resources, and we brought forward £11.4 million of funding to address student hardship. We provided £5 million to support digital inclusion and to offset the cost of information and communications technology equipment for learners who are in need of extra support. We provided £10 million of extra capital funding so that our colleges and universities can maintain their buildings and put in place social distancing measures. We are maximising the role of our colleges and universities in Scotland’s economic recovery, and our colleges will also benefit from the £100 million that the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture announced for new labour market initiatives.

All of us have to adjust to a new type of normal, but I am also looking ahead. As the committee will be aware, in the face of the shock of Covid, we have commissioned the Scottish Funding Council to lead a review on the reshaping of Scotland’s education system. I can update the committee that the review will report the first stage of its findings by late September. By undertaking the review at this time, we will be able to draw together the experience of today in designing the system of tomorrow.

I look forward to working with all our sectors to ensure a safe and future-proofed learning experience for all Scottish learners and, most important, to ensure that tens of thousands of students enjoy a safe return to further and higher education in the new academic year.

The Convener: Thank you very much, minister. As you rightly said, we find ourselves in unprecedented times due to Covid. The timing of the reversal of the SQA’s initial pupil awards meant that some pupils who had conditional offers had their university places declined. What is the agreement between the Government and the universities on funding for those pupils? What advice can you give to pupils who might find that, for capacity reasons, the university is no longer able to honour its conditional offer?

Richard Lochhead: I do not need to go over the extraordinary events since Covid arrived in our country and the impact that the pandemic has had on further and higher education, pupils and the exam system. We recognise that it has been a very difficult and anxious time for many of Scotland’s young people, as well as for school

teachers and all our staff in further and higher education institutions.

Once the system of using teachers’ predicted grades was adopted, we took the decision that no student applicant in Scotland would be crowded out and miss out on their college or university place as a result of the impact of Covid and changes to grades. Our universities and colleges have been hugely supportive and very positive; I am full of admiration for the way in which they have approached the subject and worked with the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. I am humbled by how everyone has rallied round.

The universities are doing their utmost to accommodate everyone. Ministers are negotiating with universities through the Scottish Funding Council. We have pledged that we will fund the extra places: no one should be crowded out. We expect people who were given conditional offers to have those honoured, and we have communicated that to the sector.

09:45

There are some individual issues, and I am aware of some cases that we are investigating. There are other cases of people being given conditional offers and receiving grades that were subsequently revised to mean that they met the conditions of the offer but not getting a place. Clearly, we should investigate those cases. However, I recognise that the universities are doing their best to deal with the situation.

We do not have the figures yet; we will get them to the committee and to Parliament as soon as we have them. Everything is still churning—the admissions offices are open until 7 September. We have a rough estimate—we cannot assume that this is the final figure—that 2,000 to 3,000 extra university places will be required. Our ballpark figure to fully fund that is £16 million to £24 million. That is the latest estimate, but the figure could be higher or lower—I am trying to give the committee a frank message about what we think the figure is at the moment.

That is the position. We should remember that the vast majority of applicants got their preferred choice of university. We are closely monitoring all the figures.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Good morning, minister. I want to follow up on your answer to the convener’s question. You have estimated that 2,000 to 3,000 additional university places will be required as a result of the decision by the SQA to award teacher-estimated grades. I think that you said a couple of times that you are committed to fully funding those places, but university places are not generally fully funded by the Scottish Government. The estimates vary, but the teaching

grant is around 90 per cent of the cost of teaching a student. Universities are expected to make up the rest of the cost from other sources of income. The teaching grant has not increased for many years, so the gap has widened.

My question is straightforward: when you say that you will fund those places, will the Scottish Government fully fund them, or will each of those students be a cost to the universities?

Richard Lochhead: The Scottish Funding Council review is looking at issues around the financial models and the future of further and higher education. We have had positive feedback from universities on how we are approaching that. I do not have the final figures from the Scottish Funding Council, so I do not know what will be arrived at. We have asked the universities how much they need us to give them to fund those extra places. Those negotiations are going well, so I am confident that we will fund those places.

As far as the definition of fully funded is concerned, there is cross-subsidy within universities and, as I have said previously, the full economic cost of universities in Scotland is the same as the United Kingdom average. There are different subsidies for research and teaching across the UK, but it all comes out in the same place. We will negotiate the funding of the extra places with the universities.

Iain Gray: I do not understand that answer. If the places are not fully funded, every one of the additional 3,000 places will be a cost to the institution that the student attends. It is true that there are cross-subsidies in universities, but the source of that—the Deputy First Minister has made this case to the committee in the past—is usually fee-paying overseas students, and we know that that source of income is in jeopardy.

Is it the case that the Scottish Government does not intend to fully fund those places by picking up 100 per cent of the cost of teaching those students?

Richard Lochhead: No. Our position is that we will fully fund the additional places at college and university as a result of the—

Iain Gray: You will provide a teaching grant of 100 per cent.

Richard Lochhead: Yes. What I am saying to you is that one person's definition of the full cost of that might be different from another person's. We discuss such issues with the universities all the time, because the funding model is complex. Universities take a block of money and use it to supply places.

Iain Gray: I am sorry, but that answer is contradictory. I am asking whether the places in question will be funded at a higher level than the

existing places for which funding had already been agreed or whether they will be funded at the same level, which is a shortfall from the teaching grant. Will those places be fully funded while the other places at university that were already agreed will be funded at a lower level?

Richard Lochhead: Our commitment is to fully fund the additional places at college and university. Negotiations are taking place between the Scottish Funding Council and the universities as to what that figure is, but we do not have that yet—that is the point that I am trying to make.

The Convener: We go to Mr Neil now.

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I just want to check the number—[*Inaudible*].

The Convener: Mr Neil, I have to stop you there. I am sorry, but the sound quality is terrible. Is there anything that we can do to improve it? It seems to be the connection.

Mr Neil, would it be possible for you to drop your video and just come in with sound to see whether that improves the sound quality?

Alex Neil: Yes, I am happy to do that.

The Convener: That is much better—thank you.

Alex Neil: First, I just want to check the numbers. According to the latest UCAS figures, which were published before 4 August, the number of students from Scotland who have been accepted into Scottish universities is up from 27,880 last year to 28,240, which is a rise of 360. Mr Lochhead said earlier that between 2,000 and 3,000 additional students are going to university. What is the reason for the difference between the figure of 360 and an increase of 2,000 to 3,000?

Richard Lochhead: I am trying to get my head around the question. We cannot yet break down the number of students who have applied and got their places who would otherwise not have got those places. However, the overall estimate that we have so far from the Scottish Funding Council is that there could be 2,000 to 3,000 people who now qualify for their places at university as a result of the grades being revised. In the meantime, we have an increase overall in the number of Scottish students who have applied to Scottish universities and been accepted. I will have to write back to the committee to give a full breakdown of that, if that is okay with Alex Neil.

Alex Neil: That is fine. I realise that the figures are jumping around all over the place as time moves on.

On international students, the figures from the Scottish Parliament information centre show that the number of students from outside the EU who have been accepted into Scottish universities this year is at a record high of 2,360. Two questions

arise from that. First, does it look as though that will be the final figure, which would be welcome news? Secondly, that figure is for non-EU international students; what is the current position on the EU students who applied this year?

Richard Lochhead: Thank you for that figure. However, there are a lot of figures out there at the moment, and we will not know the net impact of all that for another few days. The latest UCAS figures show that the figure for accepted applications from EU students is down by 5 per cent, whereas the figure for non-EU international students is up by 11 per cent. That gives us an overall increase of 3 per cent in the number of international students who have been accepted, as the proportion of EU international students is different from the proportion of non-EU international students. That figure is extremely encouraging and, as Alex Neil alluded to, it shows an increase.

There is a difference between who has been accepted for a place and who actually arrives to take up a place at university. That is the big question mark that we face at the moment. We know how many deposits have been placed by international students. Universities gauge the number of international students by the number of applications and the number of people who have actually put down a deposit for their accommodation, got their visa and so on.

We get varying reports. Deposits for accommodation are at 50 to 60 per cent, so some universities are saying that they are expecting a 30 to 40 per cent decline, but the figures are changing all the time. Of course, some international students are not due to come until January. Others might decide that they will not come at all for various reasons, even though they have accepted a place. Many international students accept places from various universities across the world, so until we get nearer the time, the universities will not know the exact number.

I hope that that explains to Alex Neil that it is a moveable feast. It is encouraging that many international students have chosen to apply to Scottish institutions. That is a good sign.

I should also say that the UCAS figures do not include postgraduates, and many international students do postgraduate qualifications. Postgraduates deal directly with the universities, and there is mixed feedback coming from the universities about that.

Alex Neil: It is fair to say, therefore, that the news is far better than we were expecting a few months ago. Even if there is a slight difference between the numbers as they are at the moment and what actually happens, it still looks as though the news is much better than was forecast three or four months ago.

That takes me on to the financial implications of the new numbers. The last time you appeared before the committee, the forecast deficit for the universities sector in Scotland for next year was estimated to be up to £400 million to £500 million. Given the new figures—particularly as it looks as though the anticipated drop in the number of international students is not going to happen—what is the updated and revised forecast?

Colleges are equally important, and, the last time the figures appeared, the forecast deficit for colleges was anything up to between £100 million and £150 million. What is the update on the estimates of the deficit for the university sector and the college sector as things stand? I realise that it is a bit of a moving target.

Richard Lochhead: I can give Alex Neil and the committee some encouraging news, although the situation is still challenging. I asked the Scottish Funding Council for the figures before I came to the committee.

First, Alex Neil is correct: the figure for international students is much more encouraging, and that is a testament to the reputation of Scottish education. However, there is a lot of uncertainty because of the pandemic and the other reasons that we know about, so we should not get carried away. The Scottish Funding Council has said that the latest forecast for the deficit for universities for the coming academic year is now £191 million, which is down from an initial range of £384 million to £651 million, depending on how many international students did not come to Scotland. The latest figure is £191 million, which is much healthier. Although the situation is still challenging, that indicates that the international student situation is improving.

Secondly, on colleges, the latest forecast for the coming academic year is a £9 million deficit across the whole sector. The previous estimate was £12 million. Again, the figure has been revised as a result of a combination of assistance from the Scottish Government, the on-going furloughing of staff, and the situation as regards international students. Those are all in the mix for the latest estimates from the Scottish Funding Council.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. We move on to Mr Halcro Johnston.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I would like to go back to the point that Iain Gray made. You talked about one person's idea of fully funded being different from another's, which suggests that the Government's definition of fully funded is different from that of the universities. The universities have raised the issue of the additional costs that they will face just to keep students safe and meet some of the Covid requirements. What funding per student have the

universities said that they will need? Is the Scottish Government committed to meeting that request from Scotland's universities?

10:00

Richard Lochhead: The universities are putting a lot of effort into making their campuses safe, as are the colleges. Some of the £10 million for maintenance that I mentioned earlier has—I think—been used for some of those measures.

We do not yet have from the Scottish Funding Council the overall cost of the measures that have had to be put in place. We will keep the matter under review. If the universities come to us, we will look at that—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am sorry, minister—I am asking what amount the universities have intimated to you that they need per student, or to cover that cost.

Richard Lochhead: They have not given us those figures, as far as I am aware.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: So, you have not had the universities saying, "This is what we're going to need in terms of additional finance."

Richard Lochhead: I do not have figures on that from the Scottish Funding Council.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: If the universities came to you with a figure for the cost per student or whatever, would you be willing to meet the entirety of that amount with full funding?

Richard Lochhead: The universities are given their allocation from the Scottish Funding Council, and they have been using that funding to make campuses safe. In addition, we have given them additional support through the £10 million that I mentioned.

We will continue to talk to our universities about the pressures that they are under. We recognise that they are under pressure, but so are Scottish Government budgets. We will have those discussions with them. You are asking me to give a commitment that we would absolutely give them what they wanted. Obviously, I cannot give that commitment at the moment, but we understand the pressures that universities are under and we will continue to talk to them.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I would like to ask about colleges as well, but first I say that if you are going to refer to "fully funded" university places, those places have to be fully funded, not simply funded according to a Scottish Government definition of what "fully funded" means or what you think it means.

On colleges, Colleges Scotland has said:

"Scottish Government ministers have made it clear they view the college sector as being at the heart of the social and economic recovery, however, there has as yet been scant forthcoming financial assistance to support this activity, in comparison to the £75 million investment received by the university sector to support research activity."

Do you agree with that statement?

You mentioned a deficit figure of £9 million. Colleges Scotland has suggested that the figure will be £27.5 million in 2021. Do you recognise that figure? Would you look to fund the difference?

Richard Lochhead: Again, we recognise that colleges are currently under pressure, for a variety of reasons. There is no doubt that more resources will be flowing to the colleges—I do not yet know the figures—as a result of the programme for government announcements on the youth guarantee for jobs, training and education. We have already allocated an extra £3 million from the flexible workforce fund, and I mentioned other figures earlier. We are doing all that we can to help the colleges—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: One of the concerns that the colleges raise—

Richard Lochhead: The £9 million is the figure that I have from the Scottish Funding Council for the projected deficit, so that is the figure that I am using. The £75 million that went to universities was to underpin research activity, which is under huge pressure.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: One of the issues that the colleges raise is that there are too many pots, and they want a simpler system. Why is there a disparity between what the colleges suggest that they need, which is £27.5 million, and what you, or the Scottish Funding Council, are suggesting that they need next year, which is £9 million?

Richard Lochhead: There is always a debate between the colleges, the Scottish Funding Council and Government about the resources that are required. We do our best to help where we can, but clearly we cannot meet all the demands all the time, given the pressures on the Scottish Government's budget.

There is a broader debate around the finances of devolution and how we would rather have more flexibility over borrowing to help. We had next to no consequentials from the UK Government to help further and higher education in Scotland. There are some packages from the UK Government to help higher education, which may or may not be used, depending on the situation with international students.

We are working in a very difficult financial situation. The question that you ask is a good one for the Scottish Funding Council to answer, because it gave me the figure of £9 million. If the

colleges disagree with that figure, I will ask the Scottish Funding Council to give me its view on the matter.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Good morning, minister. In your opening statement, you mentioned that between 2,000 and 3,000 extra places will be funded. We know that students who start a course occasionally drop out of their college or university place when they discover, for whatever reason, that it is not for them. In the case of the additional places, if a student drops out, what will happen to their funding? Will it stay in the system?

Richard Lochhead: If I understand your question correctly, you are referring to the slight concern that exists about the number of students who go to university but might not complete their course. Is that where you are coming from?

Beatrice Wishart: Yes.

Richard Lochhead: That is a good point. The universities have said that they are looking at how they can put in extra support for students who might need it to get through their degree. We will speak to them about that. They are very conscious that some students will need extra support.

We will take a sympathetic view with regard to the funding. In addition, at the moment, we have the plus one funding, whereby all students are entitled to get an extra year of funding under certain circumstances. If a student were to change course or take time out, we would be sympathetic to protecting their funding or at least leaving the funding in the system. What I am trying to say is that we will be very sympathetic.

Beatrice Wishart: Okay. How do you think that the additional places will affect the widening access targets?

Richard Lochhead: UCAS has published some encouraging statistics in the past week or two that show that acceptance by universities of applications from students in the more deprived areas of Scotland is up by 5 per cent and that, for 18-year-olds alone, it is up by 7 per cent, to a record high. Therefore, there is evidence that more people from disadvantaged backgrounds are getting into university. As you know, we have already met our 2021 target of 16 per cent. We are making good progress with widening access, and there are some encouraging signs that we are going in the right direction.

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I have a quick question that relates to the answer you gave to Alex Neil about the deficit. Just for clarity, is the money that the Scottish Government will put in to fund the extra 3,000 or so Scottish students included in the deficit or does

it need to be added to it, so that the deficit would reduce?

Richard Lochhead: It is not included in the £191 million that I mentioned, which is the latest estimate of the deficit that our universities face as a result of Covid. The Scottish funding council will keep all of that under review and, once we have agreed how many new places need to be funded and that funding is provided to the sector, it might or might not influence the deficit figures. I cannot tell whether that is the situation at the moment.

Gil Paterson: Okay. So, the deficit has the potential to reduce because of the funding?

Richard Lochhead: That will depend on how the universities manage their finances. As I said, the finances of universities are very complex. There is a lot of cross-subsidising, and the more students they have, the greater are the economies of scale. However, they will no doubt have to hire more staff because there will be a lot more students, and there will be costs involved in increasing the number of university places. Therefore, we have said that we will fully fund those additional places if they tell us what it will cost. What impact it has on the bigger picture of university finance remains to be seen.

Gil Paterson: I have two questions on practical things that relate to students. Many students are doing all their lessons and studies remotely. Is the digital capacity resilient enough? That might be a question for the universities themselves rather than for you.

Richard Lochhead: The issues of digital capacity and the digital divide are very acute at the moment. There have been several substantial announcements by the Scottish Government for families who are on low incomes or who are unable to get the benefits of connectivity. It was announced as part of the programme for government, on 1 September, that tens of millions of pounds will go towards resolving that. We have given £5 million specifically to the universities and colleges to help students, particularly those who are facing hardship, to access devices and connectivity. At £350 per student, that will cover about 14,000 students in Scotland. It is up to the colleges and universities to identify those students.

They are doing a monumental amount of work over and above that. Yesterday or the day before, I saw a picture on Twitter, from North East Scotland College in Aberdeen, of a whole room full of laptops—hundreds of them—that had just been purchased to be given to students. That situation is being replicated across all our institutions, which are working flat out to make sure that everyone has access to online learning and has devices and connectivity.

I am sure that there are challenges out there, but I know that universities and colleges are reaching out to people to help them to get access if that is what they need.

Gil Paterson: My last question is another practical one. For some students, their studies will now be all online, so there will be no lab work. How will that impact on marking, as students will not be practising in a lab? How will they be marked when it comes to exams?

Richard Lochhead: The universities and colleges have a lot of experience of that because of the previous term, when they went into lockdown at the beginning of the Covid crisis. In a lot of cases, they moved to continuous assessment.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education is responsible for maintaining standards in the quality of learning in higher education, and Education Scotland has a role to play with colleges as well. Those bodies are paying close attention to the quality of learning online to ensure that it is up to the necessary standards. There is going to be a lot of work in looking at that, but the universities have a lot of experience of it and continuous assessment has been used for a lot of courses.

Many courses require practical input. The committee will, no doubt, come on to discuss the guidelines that were issued yesterday for the safe return of colleges and universities, but one reason why colleges went back quite early is that they were dealing with assessments for deferred students by getting them back into colleges for the practical courses. As we speak, there are students in colleges in some parts of Scotland who are finishing qualifications that they had not been able to complete during lockdown, because they had to get back in to do the practical part of their assessments.

Clearly, it is horses for courses, but there is a lot more emphasis on online learning.

Gil Paterson: Thank you.

Kenneth Gibson: In its written evidence to the committee, Universities Scotland said that

“the price paid to teach each Scottish domiciled students falls far short of the full economic cost of teaching”.

We have heard that the Scottish Government has a different view of funding. Although Jamie Halcro Johnston seems to naively think that the Scottish Government should just pay whatever universities say the cost of teaching is, is there any independent assessment of what it costs to teach each student, so that we can come to a fair settlement for the funding that is required by our universities?

Richard Lochhead: That is a good question. Audit Scotland is the obvious answer, as it reports on the financial sustainability of further and higher education in Scotland and looks at those issues.

We give funding to Scottish higher education, and we accept cross-subsidy between different aspects of its work. We have given a commitment to fully fund the cohort that we are talking about today. I was asked about earlier. The universities tell us what it costs to fund them, and we have said that we will fully fund the additional places that are required—there is no doubt about that. The Scottish Funding Council is also doing its own review into the wider financing and sustainability of further and higher education, in which it will look at those issues in the round. I am sure that that will look in detail at the cost of teaching at university.

We have a formula, which we have agreed with universities, that involves providing funding for each university place. We pay £1,820 for tuition fees on behalf of each student, and then there are different groups of Scottish Funding Council contributions for different types of courses. For example, universities get a much higher payment per place for the group of courses that come under medicine. Overall, we give £1 billion a year to the universities.

10:15

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you for that detailed answer. Of course, it is not just the Scottish Government that contributes to our universities; the UK Government has made a number of support packages available, such as the package to support research jobs. However, Universities Scotland has said that there are a couple of aspects of that that mean that it is not likely to offer the same benefits to Scottish universities as it offers to those in England. For example, it says that the package has been deliberately designed so that the funding will underpin only research, not teaching, and that, because of a loan-to-grant ratio of 75:25, universities in Scotland have been denied the opportunity to get only the grant aspect, because, if they were to borrow that amount, that could breach covenants on existing loans.

What are the financial implications of those measures, and what impact are they having on our universities?

Richard Lochhead: We had extensive negotiations with the UK Government, and I have been a member of its research task force—it has not met for a while, but I think that it is still in existence. It considered the implications of Covid on the UK's research expertise and capacity. There were a number of factors in that. It involved ensuring that, as everything came to a halt, the

contracts that many of our researchers and universities rely on did not run out. The UK Government helpfully put money on the table to ensure that those contracts could be extended. That was important, because, otherwise, the researchers would have lost their jobs and the programmes would have stopped. Because action was taken, once things get going again, people will still have their jobs.

On the sustainability of universities, as you say, the UK Government came up with a complicated formula for helping to meet up to 80 per cent of a university's income losses for the coming academic year from international students not arriving. It recognised that international students subsidise research in our universities, so it decided to link its help for research to the number of international students that did not turn up. That help was to be delivered through two channels: one was a small grant and the other involved long-term loans with a low interest rate. The suggestion was that any university that wanted to take advantage of that had to take both the loan and the grant; it could not just take the grant. A lot of universities in Scotland were nervous about that, because they were basically being told that any help was dependent on their taking out loans. Obviously, universities already have loans and many are concerned at the thought of taking out more. Therefore, some will take advantage of that scheme and some will not. We share the concerns of those universities.

The UK Government offered a further form of assistance that we chose not to participate in. It was a UK scheme that was run by the Department for Education at a UK level, which it was willing to make open to Scottish universities. However, that entailed the UK Government taking a decision on which Scottish universities could benefit from getting restructuring support and on the conditions attached to that. The Scottish universities sector and the Scottish Government thought that there were too many hoops to jump through and that, if this became a serious situation, it could leave the fate of Scottish universities in the hands of the UK Department for Education, which would, in effect, decide which ones to save and which ones not to save. Education is a devolved matter and it is for the Scottish Parliament to decide how to support our universities and which issues should be prioritised. That is why we are not part of that scheme.

Kenneth Gibson: You are right to say that no university in Scotland intends to make use of the UK Government's restructuring plan. The universities have said that this was a missed opportunity to create a package that incentivised institutional transformation to secure sustainability in ways that would address wider economic and societal needs. Where do we go from here with

that restructuring plan? Are you going back to the UK Government on it? Is the plan dead in the water? Are there any ways in which universities could take advantage of the plan if it was adapted?

Richard Lochhead: The universities are willing to look at the package of support that the UK Government has offered, with its long-term loans and some grant. That option remains on the table, and, if there is no alternative from the UK Government, universities will clearly consider it. If there is such a decline in the number of international students that the research base is at risk, universities will qualify for the support.

As the committee discussed earlier, the international student numbers are looking a bit more healthy than we expected, so there may be less need for that scheme, although we do not know yet, as it is very much linked to the number of international students who come to the UK. We will keep up our representation to the UK Government that it is really important to protect our research base.

A large part of the research agenda is reserved to the UK Government—it is not devolved. We therefore believe that the UK Government has a responsibility, if it wants to keep Britain a “science superpower”—as the Prime Minister put it—to back that up with resources to support the Scottish research base rather than just have that as a slogan.

The Convener: Thanks, minister. We are going to move to—

Kenneth Gibson: Thanks very much, minister. Can I ask one tiny, brief question about colleges, convener?

The Convener: I am sorry, Mr Gibson. I will bring you in after other members have had a chance to come in. I will come back to you but, for the moment, we will hear from Mr Greene, followed by Daniel Johnson.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Minister, did you read the submissions from Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland prior to today's evidence session?

Richard Lochhead: I do not think that I was sent them. I have seen their recent submissions on various issues to do with financial sustainability.

Jamie Greene: They are in the public domain—I have just checked. The evidence that was submitted to the committee by Universities Scotland in advance of today's meeting says that

“the price paid to teach each Scottish domiciled student falls far short of the full economic cost of teaching”.

Other members have referred to that. Universities Scotland has quoted the figure of £700 as the shortfall per person. Do you think that committee members are naive in believing that figure?

Richard Lochhead: We accept that there is cross-subsidy in the university sector in Scotland, as I said, but we fund the universities as a package and they decide how to run their businesses. We give more than £1 billion, and there has been a rise in the number of Scottish students, a rise in the overall number of students in Scotland and a rise in research activity. It appears that the investment by the Scottish Government is delivering for Scotland and its students.

Jamie Greene: That is the answer that I would probably give if I were you, but my question relates to the clear difference of opinion regarding what both colleges and universities think the shortfall and their deficits are versus what you think they are—and, indeed, what the SFC believes they are. As committee members, we have to consider both arguments.

Richard Lochhead: I understand that.

Jamie Greene: Whom should we believe, and which numbers are accurate? Either way, there is a deficit.

Richard Lochhead: It is in order to examine those issues that we have asked the Funding Council to conduct a major review into the financial sustainability of Scotland's further and higher education sector.

We are not here to have an argument with the universities over the cost of teaching. We negotiate with universities in the round to ensure that they are delivering for Scotland, and all the evidence is that they are doing so with the money that we supply and their other income streams. Any Government would have that negotiation with a major sector such as our universities.

Jamie Greene: I will move on to an important issue regarding colleges. The submissions from numerous organisations, including the EIS and Colleges Scotland, mention the "important role" that colleges will play in our economic growth and recovery over the difficult next few months and years. I think we all agree that colleges play a vital role in skilling the workforce. You have quoted a figure of £9 million as the deficit; colleges themselves have said that the deficit is £27.5 million. In fact, the total deficit for 2020-21 is £32.9 million, so there is a shortfall of £32 million.

Colleges cannot generate revenue in the way that universities can, as you know—colleges are fully publicly funded. What will be the real impact of that deficit on our colleges? Will it mean cuts to

staff, to places or to courses? We know that some colleges are about to hit the wall because of their cash flow. Is that sustainable? How does it fit the Government's narrative that colleges are important to our economic recovery?

Richard Lochhead: We are in a challenging situation because of Covid. Our colleges were under financial pressure before that due to a range of factors, but—for all the reasons we have already discussed—Covid has had a massive impact on the finances of further and higher education. Income streams have dried up, young people have chosen different paths and companies may not be able to afford so many apprentices, although I hope that that will be addressed by the announcement of help with that that the Scottish Government has made.

We are in a difficult position, which is taking an economic toll on our colleges as it is on our universities. The Scottish Government's budget has limitations but we are doing our best to support colleges. No college is going to go to the wall. I have regular conversations with the Scottish Funding Council, which has said that any college that is facing severe financial stress should approach the council. SFC budgets will be re-profiled to ensure that the college can continue to do its job. We should be careful about saying that colleges will go to the wall, as that is not the case.

Jamie Greene: They will run out of money, and my question is about what will happen then. Will colleges cut staff, places or courses? How will that affect the vital role that colleges play? That is my question.

Richard Lochhead: You are right about the role that colleges play. They play a massive role, and we have some incredible colleges that are quickly changing how they deliver education. They are looking at reskilling, and the Scottish Funding Council has committed to re-profiling £20 million of forthcoming budgets to upskilling projects and initiatives within colleges.

We are working with them to ensure that they can adapt to the post-Covid economic recovery and the needs of the economy. We will do our best to support them, and we are working closely with them. Colleges must also cut their coat to fit their cloth, because we have limited budgets. The workforce is changing and, if the role of or need for colleges changes, they must adapt to that.

I am confident that we will see the opposite to what you suggest. The role of colleges will become even more important, and we will do our best to support their budgets. They will get support from some of what was announced in the programme for government. That has not been worked out yet, but there is significant money for retraining and for education and skills. The

colleges will have a role to play in that, and that should help them.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Alex Neil gave you the glass-half-full version on international students; I will try the glass-half-empty version.

You acknowledged that universities do not know whether international students will come until they pay deposits or even until they arrive, which can happen at any point in the year. It remains a risk, so I would like some clarification.

You said that you do not have any clear insight into postgraduate applications and that there is a mixed picture. What information do you have about that? What steps is the Scottish Government taking to monitor that situation? It could change rapidly, and it has implications for the cash flow of institutions. There may be a need to step in urgently if it transpires that students have applied but have not shown up.

There are also other risk factors. Some students have been unable to apply for visas because visa offices are closed, and some countries do not recognise electronic study. That is a problem for students from China.

What risks have been identified and are being tracked by the Scottish Government? I hope you do not mind my packaging those into one question.

Richard Lochhead: That is why we are in regular contact with the SFC. Before I came to the committee today, I asked for an up-to-date figure for the projected deficit, and I have given you that. We are closely monitoring the situation, and we have asked the SFC to stay in regular touch with universities about the trends in international students so that we can understand the scale of the challenge. We are waiting for more data on the postgraduate situation because of the late decisions that students are taking. As a result of that, it is very difficult to get accurate data on postgraduate students at the moment.

10:30

I emphasise that things are different this year compared with previous years. The arrival of international students will be staggered over a longer period—some will not arrive until January and some universities are opening two or three weeks later than they did last year, so there are different timelines. There are also on-going issues with the pandemic and people's ability to travel and access visa offices. It is therefore very difficult to predict what will happen, but the data from UCAS, which shows a rise in the number of applications and acceptances, is a good indicator. We simply need those people to turn up.

We will rely on the United Kingdom Government. If there is a significant change in the coming months, with the pandemic or with other factors, that leads to a massive drop in the number of international students and therefore a drop in income for institutions, we will not have the borrowing powers or the financial ability that we need in the Scottish Government, so we will need the UK Government to help. It has given very limited help so far, which we and the sector have found very disappointing. However, if the situation changes for the worse, the UK Government will need to step in.

Daniel Johnson: On the basis of the figures that you have quoted, there is at least the possibility that there could be a £200 million shortfall—indeed, the figure could be greater than that. Are you saying that the Scottish Government has made no contingency funding available and that it will be wholly reliant on the UK Government stepping in to provide all that money? Is any contingency planning going on to make funds available should that situation arise?

Richard Lochhead: There is a projected deficit of £191 million, and there is the matter of how to handle that deficit if it comes to fruition. The universities will have a reasonable ability to work their way through that, but we will not be in a position to pick up a £191 million bill, so we will look for maximum support from the UK Government if we find ourselves in that position and it has an impact on the operation of universities. However, a lot of our universities have significant reserves. We would have to manage our way through the situation as well as possible with the SFC, the universities, the UK Government and the Scottish Government working together, as I do not have £191 million.

Daniel Johnson: You say that the universities have cash reserves, but we have looked at the balance sheets and lots of them do not. Lots of them rely on international students. You have stated that you will not let any colleges go to the wall. Can you make the same statement about universities?

Richard Lochhead: At the moment, I cannot envisage any university facing the dire straits that you are speaking about. We will do our best to manage our way through this.

Daniel Johnson: But that is not to know—

Richard Lochhead: We are talking about a university sector with over £4 billion-worth of income. I am not denying that a deficit of £191 million is significant; I am just saying that we will have to find a way through that and that we will rely on support from the UK Government, which has much more ability to help than we have with the limited powers of the Scottish Parliament.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I want to ask about the impact of yesterday's announcement affecting Glasgow, West Dunbartonshire and East Renfrewshire. Glasgow has three universities, and there are a number of colleges in those local authority areas. Will you clarify the guidance and what the Government's recommendation is for anyone from those areas who is due to move to a new household over the next week or so for the purpose of attending university?

Richard Lochhead: Following the announcements last night, we are looking at supplementary guidance, as we published guidance just yesterday. That is a living document for the safe reopening of campuses in the sectors. We are looking at all those issues at the moment.

The restrictions to do with indoor or home gatherings that were announced yesterday will, of course, apply to everyone irrespective of whether the person is a student. However, we are looking at the guidance on people moving to student accommodation. I do not have that supplementary guidance yet, as there was an announcement just yesterday.

Ross Greer: I appreciate that. It would be good if you could indicate when that guidance will come out—I imagine that it is imminent and might come out in the next couple of days.

I want to clarify one point. It might seem obvious to us, but it would be helpful for it to be put on the record. The updated guidance for people in the affected areas is that, if they are in a household in which anyone else has been in close contact with someone who has tested positive—they could be two degrees of separation away from that individual—they must still self-isolate for the next 14 days. That might include people who had intended to move into a new household in the next 14 days for the purpose of attending university. Will you confirm that people in that situation are to self-isolate in their current households?

Richard Lochhead: We will publish guidance on that, but I confirm that all the restrictions that have been announced will apply to students and their accommodation.

Ross Greer: I will move on to a wider issue. Distancing during in-person learning is not happening in a huge number of school settings, particularly high schools. We know that older students are more at risk, and college and university students are, by and large, older than those at school. The University of St Andrews is the latest institution to announce that it will default to remote learning from the start of term and that it will phase in in-person learning later. Can you confirm to the committee whether any other colleges' or universities' plans for in-person or

blended learning currently cause the Government concern? What action would you take with institutions—not with individual staff or students, but with institutions themselves—whose provision did not meet the public health protection standards that we would expect?

Richard Lochhead: We are working very closely with our institutions on the guidance that was published yesterday. As the committee will know, that guidance puts a clear emphasis on blended learning, with the focus within that being on remote learning and teaching. Staff are also being urged to continue to work from home where they can. You will also be aware of the many other measures that are being put in place over and above that.

Obviously, we will keep a close eye on the success or otherwise of those measures and on how the guidance is being implemented. That will be reviewed constantly and if, in our view, the sector or any institution is not adhering to the spirit of the guidance, we and public health officials will deal with it directly. Other avenues might also be followed. For example, the Health and Safety Executive would have a role to play if particular situations were to arise in institutions, in which case its own powers would enable it to deal with those.

I do not anticipate that happening. We have had positive feedback from all the institutions. I know that the situation is challenging for them and that they have been working hard on preparations all summer. We published a previous set of guidance at the end of June; yesterday's guidance is fuller and much more up to date. Institutions are taking extraordinary steps to make their campuses safe, so, at this stage, I have no reason to think that any of them will not abide by the spirit of the guidance.

Ross Greer: I have one more question, on face coverings, but I am conscious of the time. Is there time for my final question, convener, or should I come back in later?

The Convener: Very quickly, Mr Greer. At this point, we are ahead of where I thought we would be, so please go ahead.

Ross Greer: Minister, can you confirm that the guidance on the use of face coverings in college and university settings is now, by and large, the same as that for high school settings?

Richard Lochhead: It is very similar. Students and staff will be asked to wear face coverings in communal areas and those where it is difficult to maintain 2m physical distancing. The rules that apply in wider society, in settings such as shops and libraries, also apply on campuses. As you know, we have also provided figures in relation to how we define situations in which limited face-to-face teaching is permitted. Those are mainly

groups of no more than 30 people, including students and staff, but in some cases a limit of 50 people will be more appropriate.

As you know, a large part of the guidance is that there should be no large indoor gatherings, and that applies to university and college settings, too. We have defined, as far as we could, what is considered not to be a large gathering. However, we know that there are courses that, for very important educational and practical reasons, may require there to be around 50 people in large, ventilated spaces. I understand that some universities have even hired additional large buildings so that they can conduct their teaching safely.

We have asked universities to make sure that, where there is to be a higher number of people or face-to-face teaching, they pay attention to the latest advice on face coverings.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): In a way, my question picks up on that issue. What conversations are universities, in particular, having with the Government about how the shape of learning is changing and how the efficacy of that learning is being monitored at a time of unavoidable rapid change?

You mentioned lectures. I am not about to make a case for old-fashioned lectures, because I know that universities have been questioning the purpose of overconcentrating on that type of learning, but what assessment is being made of this rapidly and necessarily changing way of learning for university students in terms of its value as learning?

Richard Lochhead: That is a good question. A debate is taking place about where face-to-face teaching is essential for education purposes. Students are concerned about that—it is not just the institutions that are concerned. Students want the experience of face-to-face teaching. We have to be very careful, because we need to make sure that we are delivering a proper education and a proper educational experience for students. I think that we are all concerned about that. However, public health clearly comes first and, at the moment, the emphasis has to be on remote teaching, although we are permitting limited face-to-face teaching.

As I have said, the universities and colleges have gained a lot of experience from the previous term, when they had to change quickly to remote and online teaching. They have learned a lot of lessons that they are putting into practice for the new term. I am sure that it is not all rosy, because we know that a lot of staff members are finding the situation quite challenging. They are being supported by their institutions. We also know that students do not like the idea of solely at-home

learning going on for too long. Therefore, face-to-face teaching is an important element, but it has to be limited.

As I have said, Education Scotland—in relation to colleges—and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education are paying close attention to make sure that standards of education are adhered to, given the change to remote teaching and online learning.

Dr Allan: My next question relates to a point that I think that you made in your introductory remarks. For many people, one of the purposes of going to university—in addition to learning what is on the course—is to, if not broaden their mind, at least chip away a bit around the edges of their own ignorance. When an 18-year-old arrives at university, that implies, as you mentioned, that they will make friends, perhaps meet people with different cultures from other parts of the world and take part in the common life of the university. I do not say that lightly, because I realise how difficult doing all those things will be under the current circumstances. Have the universities said anything to you about how they intend to, if not replicate, at least include some of the wider learning experience that students come away from university with in these difficult circumstances?

Richard Lochhead: That is a very good point, and the issue has been concerning me for some time. I feel heart sorry for the current generation of students who are going to university, who will not have the same rite of passage that some of us older people had who were lucky enough to attend college or university. However, I know that NUS Scotland, the universities and the colleges have put in a lot of work to give a really good experience, including a social experience, to the students. A lot of the activities during freshers week will be online. I have heard that there will be karaoke and all kinds of activities. A lot of the students seem up for that and will be taking part. It is not the same, clearly, but it is a good way of socialising, at least.

10:45

I know that a lot of thought has been put into looking after the mental health and wellbeing of students at this time and making sure that they have the opportunity to meet one another safely. They will not be able to do that in nearly the same way as happened previously. Student unions are closed and we are encouraging people not to party. There are regulations in place on indoor gatherings, and the Government has gone one step further in the area around Glasgow.

It is a challenging time, and we know that that will continue to be the case in the coming months. We are determined to keep an eye on the

guidance, so that we can allow more social interaction among students when the opportunity arises and the time is right, but it is not right at the moment—it is not safe.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Can you confirm what the current requirements are for social distancing in classrooms in universities? Are there any plans to change those requirements? Given that you have guaranteed places for students who will go to university following this year's grading issues, what concerns have universities raised with you about their ability to accommodate the additional students, through distance learning or in classrooms, while there remain issues with Covid and once we are out the other side, when universities will have to accommodate those additional students in normal working conditions?

Richard Lochhead: Those are good questions. The universities have raised with us the practical challenges that they will face as a result of having more students for some courses at a time when we require 2m social distancing in face-to-face teaching environments.

There are some circumstances—for example, in laboratories—where social distancing of less than 2m will be required. In such situations, extra mitigations will be put in place. The universities have guidance and protocols on that. I imagine that the universities were keen that face-to-face teaching was enabled by the guidance for the reason that you gave. Because some courses will have even more students on them, the universities will not be able to timetable the teaching unless a number of students can be involved in face-to-face teaching environments in lecture theatres.

However, we are still talking about lecture theatres that are designed to hold 300 or 400 people having 30—and, in some exceptional cases, perhaps 50—students in them. That is all about social distancing. As I said, I understand that some institutions have hired extra large buildings to use for teaching, to make sure that there is the necessary ventilation and social distancing. Those are factors.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: What will happen with those theatres or classrooms that might have been at capacity anyway before Covid and that will now have to accommodate additional students? Have any concerns been raised about that?

Richard Lochhead: As I said, a whole number of factors are in the mix. Blended learning will take the pressure off some elements of teaching and will free up timetables and capacity for those situations in which face-to-face teaching is required. The whole mix is changing.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: No institution has said that it cannot accommodate the extra students now or post-Covid.

Richard Lochhead: I have had no representations from institutions about their being unable to accommodate students, other than in the context of the debate about face-to-face teaching. Some universities said that, in relation to certain courses, if they did not have the ability to provide face-to-face teaching to 30, or potentially 50, students, that would make it extremely difficult to deliver those courses. The issue was raised in the context of that debate.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I will move on, because I am conscious of the time.

Have there been any discussions about reducing the 2m rule that is in place at the moment to a 1m rule? What issues have been raised by universities in that regard? What discussions have taken place on the testing of students? I am referring to the general student population of UK and Scottish students and the population of students who come in from abroad—in particular, those who come in from countries to which the quarantine applies. There needs to be regular testing so that institutions can be aware of situations in which there is concern before they develop into outbreaks.

Richard Lochhead: Testing is a big subject, but I will try to give you a quick summary of how important it is. Clearly, the outcome that we want is a safe environment for not only students and staff but local communities and wider society. It is a major milestone that universities and colleges are reopening and hundreds of thousands of students are arriving, but not overnight, as it is spread over a number of weeks and months. The strategy for keeping people safe includes international students quarantining for 14 days. The guidance puts an obligation on the institutions to ensure that the quarantine is working, effective and monitored and that the students concerned are being supported for everything from food deliveries to advice.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Will students be tested during that period as well? A student might come into a hall of residence and do their two weeks of quarantine, but another student could come into the same hall at the end of that period and they might not have been tested. They are not all coming into quarantine at the same time and leaving it at the same time. Is that a fair point?

Richard Lochhead: The clinical advice that we have is twofold. First, quarantining is essential and more important than asymptomatic testing. We have to quarantine because the virus has a 14-day incubation period. When an international student arrives from a high-risk area that is not exempt and has to quarantine, we could do a test on day 1 and not identify the virus but a test on day 2 might do so. The clear clinical advice that we have is therefore that the quarantining is essential, which

is why we have put a big obligation on institutions to ensure that it is working effectively, but they, too, want it to work. The University of St Andrews, for instance, has given us its helpful leaflet, and welcome packs are going to all international students in all institutions. St Andrews also has a coronavirus helpdesk for all international students.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: The question was about testing.

Richard Lochhead: I am coming to that.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Okay, but that is the focus.

Richard Lochhead: The focus is on symptomatic testing. We are working with public health officials to ensure that all the facilities are available for symptomatic testing for staff and students.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: What about asymptomatic testing, given that it has been a major issue? It is about monitoring testing in halls of residence. Is that being introduced, or is it something that will be continuing?

Richard Lochhead: More work is taking place on the role of testing in universities and colleges, but the focus at the moment is on the quarantining of international students who come from high-risk countries and on making symptomatic testing for students and staff as easy as possible.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Are you confident—I am certainly not—that that will identify cases in a hall of residence, for example, where everybody is close together? If one person is asymptomatic with Covid in a hall of residence, it could spread quickly but not be picked up unless somebody developed symptoms. I am not a medical expert, but it does not sound as though what you have described would meet the requirement to stop the spread in a hall of residence.

Richard Lochhead: As I said, a lot more work is going on, and we will find out the results of that soon for the on-going role of testing on campuses. However, the clear advice that we have at the moment is that quarantining is the most effective way to keep people safe and that we have to make it easy and simple for people to have symptomatic testing. For instance, the new walk-in centre that has been set up at St Andrews is there for three months and we are looking at—this is not my remit, as I am not the health secretary or the public health minister—setting up 11 walk-in centres and then increasing that number to 22. There was an announcement yesterday by the First Minister on the expansion of testing capacity. We are looking to position some of those walk-in centres in other areas around the country with large student populations. However, the clinical advice is to make it easy for symptomatic testing

to take place and to have effective quarantining of international students who come from high-risk countries,

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I would have thought that that work should have been done, though, given that students are now back. You say that there is more work to be done, but maybe it should have been done earlier.

Richard Lochhead: The approach that we are taking is the same as is being taken across the whole UK.

The Convener: Thank you. I also thank Mr Gibson for his patience. We will go to him now.

Kenneth Gibson: In its submission, Colleges Scotland said that

“The Scottish Funding Council has offered a welcome assurance on cash flows”,

but it went on to say that it is looking for

“a more joined up approach to funding instead of the current multiple funding pots”.

Is that something that the Scottish Government will explore?

Richard Lochhead: We are aware of that view of the college sector and we take it seriously. Again, that is part of the remit of the review that the Scottish Funding Council is doing. I urge the committee to engage with the SFC on the review, which should be looking at all those issues. As I said in my opening remarks, the first phase of the review will be published in late September.

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you.

Daniel Johnson: I want to look beyond the pandemic, briefly. Thinking back to my time as a student union education officer, I used constantly to rail against increasing class sizes and tried to push back and improve the amount of direct contact for students. One of my concerns throughout this situation is that it will become a new normal and we will not go back, but I think that we all know that small tutorials and seminars are the best way of learning. Is any thought or dialogue going on to ensure that there is not a ratchet effect and that we do not end up with pre-recorded lectures and remote learning as the default for learning in the future?

Richard Lochhead: That is another important point and theme. We discuss those issues with the colleges and universities, and the SFC review will be looking into them.

We have also had Anton Muscatelli’s report on the economic impact of universities and the Cumberford-Little report looking at the impact of colleges on the economy and the way forward. They flag up a lot of the big challenges and questions that we have to answer to make sure

that further and higher education is fit for purpose for the rest of the 21st century and consider what that will look like.

Covid poses a lot of big questions, one of which concerns the fact that, if there is a huge focus on online learning, someone can just sit at their desk in their home office in any part of the world for it. That would turn further and higher education upside down. However, technology also offers opportunities, because it means that students around the world can benefit from a Scottish education and it is also good business for our universities.

So, the answer is yes, there are big questions and some thinking is going on, but the SFC review will look at them as well.

Jamie Greene: I have two short questions. The first is about the guidance for managing outbreaks, although I appreciate that that is a moving feast at the moment. From the notes that we have, my interpretation is that, if there are two or more linked cases—not just confirmed but suspected linked cases—that will be treated as an outbreak and could lead to the closure of a setting. Given that some universities are home to many thousands of students and staff, does it seem proportionate and reasonable that a university or college could be closed simply because there are two positive cases of Covid?

Richard Lochhead: We have asked the universities and colleges to stay in close contact with their local public health officials. I know that a national dashboard is being set up to look at Covid in colleges and universities—although it might just be universities; I would have to check that. I understand that the dashboard will keep a monitoring overview of Covid on campuses.

I do not believe that two cases would necessarily mean the closure of a campus. A setting could mean a hall of residence or any subset of a university's campus. That is why the guidance puts a lot of emphasis on consistency. If there is face-to-face teaching, it should be the same students in each setting each time, and the student accommodation block should be consistent in terms of how the households are set up in what is called a cluster flat. Halls of residence may have sets of six or eight rooms, with some communal areas; those would be seen as cluster flats. That is why there is a lot of emphasis in the guidance on making it as easy as possible to trace people, which will avoid the scenario that Jamie Greene is talking about. None of us wants that to happen.

11:00

The response would depend on the circumstances of an outbreak. In the case of there

being a couple of positive cases, we would want universities to contact public health officials to get advice on how to handle the outbreak quickly. Public health resources would be deployed to contain it. As I said, the guidance is about making it as easy as possible to trace people. If there is face-to-face teaching, people's contact details will be taken at lectures and tutorials in order to contain the virus.

Jamie Greene: That is very helpful.

My other question is more technical. Will you clarify the Government's position on caps on student numbers in specialist subjects, particularly medicine? There have been caps in the past, given the funding mechanism that exists and the cost of teaching such subjects. In a health emergency, it is clear that we need all the medical staff that we can get to train and then, more important, stay in Scotland. Will there be any changes to the policy on the cap on student numbers?

Richard Lochhead: I am sure that caps have been lifted for some of the controlled subjects, but I would have to double-check whether the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport has lifted the cap for all the controlled subjects. We have addressed that point. The current estimate is that 160 additional places in controlled subjects will be required.

Jamie Greene: So, you do not know. Has the health secretary made the decision, or will you make it?

Richard Lochhead: The caps have been lifted, but there are various controlled-number categories. I assume that all the caps have been lifted.

Jamie Greene: Perhaps you could write to the committee.

Richard Lochhead: I can come back to the committee on that. The key point is that we are taking the extra places in the controlled subjects. From the feedback from universities, we estimate that an extra 160 places will be required. As you know, the controlled subjects are mainly health related—there are a small number of additional places in dentistry, quite a lot in medicine and so on. The universities have said that they can cope with those numbers.

Jamie Greene: That is great. Do you have a wider strategy for encouraging people into such roles? It is clear that there will be increased demand for medical jobs, in particular, in the future, so is there a strategy for developing those jobs indigenously?

Richard Lochhead: Yes, there is a strategy, and I am happy to write to the committee about it. There are, in essence, two or three legs to the

strategy. First, there are targets for increasing the number of Scotland-domiciled medical students compared with those from the rest of the United Kingdom. I can send that figure to the committee. Funded medical places have also been created in order to widen access. Over the past year or two, the health secretary has taken a number of steps to address the needs of the country in relation to medical students.

The Convener: Mr Gray's question has been asked, so we move to Mr Neil.

Alex Neil: I have a follow-up question on wellbeing, which impacts on learning. First-year international students are coming to a new country and a new university, and I am very concerned about the potential impact on their mental health if they are quarantined for two weeks, which I accept might need to happen. I ask that that issue be addressed. If students who are going to university for the first time in a brand-new foreign country are isolated for the first two weeks, we need to ensure that mental health support services are first class in looking after those young people.

Richard Lochhead: That is a very important point. I, too, am concerned about that, but I have heard a lot of good feedback from our universities about what they are doing to support international students. If members have had the chance to look at the guidance, they will have seen that we have asked for there to be wi-fi connection in all the rooms in student accommodation. Universities will provide welcome packs and regular support and contact for international students.

I am sure that the University of St Andrews offers to collect international students from railway stations and airports, so they are being given support and are being looked after. Universities are also appointing special advisers to look after international students and are doing a lot to support students' wellbeing. However, you are absolutely right that we have to make sure that students are supported across the board and that that is being well resourced.

The Convener: I have a final supplementary question. There are large staffing gaps in medicine and in other areas such as technology. Workforce planning is a huge part of what the Government has to do. Given that funding for European students will no longer be in place after this year because of Brexit, are the universities concerned about European students and others who come from areas outside the UK and Scotland?

Richard Lochhead: It is fair to say that there are concerns about a decline in the number of EU students. There has been a limited decline of 5 per cent in the number this year. That is not because of funding, because that is still in place, but it could be related to Brexit and other issues, such

as Covid-19. From next year, we will have to monitor the numbers very closely.

There are two main concerns. First, certain universities, such as the University of Aberdeen, which is definitely keeping that issue on its radar, have a disproportionate number of EU students and we will have to pay close attention to the impact on those universities. Secondly, a number of science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—courses and other courses in some universities are dependent on EU students. At the moment, we do not know whether there will be a sharp decline in numbers, because we know that we are getting more applications from international students. We hope that EU students, who will become international students, will continue to want to study in Scotland. I have said before that we will look at scholarships and other, albeit limited, measures to help us to continue to attract EU students. If Brexit puts European students off coming to Scotland, that could have an impact on the viability of some courses. We will pay attention to the financial situation.

The Convener: That concludes questions from the committee today. I thank the minister for his attendance.

That also concludes the public part of the meeting. Next week, we will take evidence from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists, on counsellors in school education.

11:08

Meeting continued in private until 11:28.

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