

EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

Tuesday 2 December 2008

Session 3

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EUROPEAN AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE

19th Meeting 2008, Session 3

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DEPUTY CONVENER

*Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

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*Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP)

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*Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)

*Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD)

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Jackson Carlaw (West of Scotland) (Con)

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

Gil Paterson (West of Scotland) (SNP)

Iain Smith (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Morag Arnot (Scottish Arts Council)

Professor Stephen Blackmore (Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh)

Roy Cross (British Council Scotland)

Frances Christensen (Confucius Institute for Scotland)

Professor Jane Duckett (Universities Scotland)

Professor Tariq Durrani (Royal Society of Edinburgh)

Michelle Grimley (Scotland's Colleges International)

Professor Dominic Houlihan (University of Aberdeen)

Professor Kay Livingston (Learning and Teaching Scotland)

Moirra McKerracher (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

CLERKS TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Tullis

Simon Watkins

ASSISTANT CLERKS

Lewis McNaughton

Lucy Scharbert

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

European and External Relations Committee

Tuesday 2 December 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:31*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Irene Oldfather): Good morning, colleagues, and welcome to the 19th meeting in 2008 of the European and External Relations Committee. I have received no apologies, so we move straight to item 1, which is to ask members whether they agree to take in private item 6, which is on the budget review, and item 7, which is on the themes from this morning's evidence-taking session on China.

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Government's China Plan

10:31

The Convener: The next item on the agenda is the first of two round-table discussions in committee on the Scottish Government's China plan. Today's discussion will cover the key themes of education, research and culture, which are part of the China plan. The second round-table discussion will be at our next meeting on 16 December and will cover business, trade and tourism. I hope that members will remember that when asking questions.

I welcome, and am grateful to, all the witnesses who have come along today. We are having a different kind of meeting today—a European round-table discussion. My colleagues will agree that we are particularly grateful for the volume of written evidence that we have received from each of the witnesses; it is welcome and will form an integral part of our inquiry. I thank Tom McCabe MSP, chair of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on China, who has provided helpful suggestions as to whom we should call as witnesses in the course of the committee's work. We have invited a few of you on his recommendation.

Before I ask everyone to introduce themselves, it might be helpful if I outline a few points about the handling of today's meeting. The intention is to facilitate interaction between witnesses—you are encouraged to comment not just on your areas but on other witnesses' contributions. We would welcome that very much. In order to keep the meeting organised, it will be helpful if comments are directed through me, so you should indicate to me that you want to speak. I will keep a list to ensure that everyone has their say. There is no need to switch on your microphones; that will be handled by our technical people.

I invite witnesses and committee members to introduce themselves.

Roy Cross (British Council Scotland): I am director of British Council Scotland.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am Alex Neil MSP.

Frances Christensen (Confucius Institute for Scotland): I am general manager of the Confucius institute for Scotland.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): I am Patricia Ferguson MSP.

Professor Kay Livingston (Learning and Teaching Scotland): I am head of international education at Learning and Teaching Scotland.

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife)
(Con): I am Ted Brocklebank MSP.

Professor Stephen Blackmore (Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh): I am director of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

Charlie Gordon (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I am Charlie Gordon MSP.

Professor Tariq Durrani (Royal Society of Edinburgh): I am vice-president of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and a professor at the University of Strathclyde.

Jamie Hepburn (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am Jamie Hepburn MSP.

Michelle Grimley (Scotland's Colleges International): I am business development executive for Scotland's Colleges International.

Jim Hume (South of Scotland) (LD): I am Jim Hume MSP.

Moir McKerracher (Scottish Qualifications Authority): I am head of international at the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Morag Arnot (Scottish Arts Council): I am director of planning and communication at the Scottish Arts Council.

Keith Brown (Ochil) (SNP): I am Keith Brown MSP.

Professor Jane Duckett (Universities Scotland): I am director of the Scottish centre for Chinese social science research and I am here to represent Universities Scotland.

Professor Dominic Houlihan (University of Aberdeen): I am vice-principal for research and commercialisation at the University of Aberdeen.

The Convener: I thank you all. We sometimes ask witnesses to make opening statements, but we have decided that today we will go straight to questions. I will start with a broad question on the Scottish Government's plan for engagement with China. Do the organisations that the witnesses represent think that the Government has got its objectives and targets right? We welcome your thoughts on the matter—I know that you commented on the matter in your written submissions, but it will be helpful to get your thoughts on the public record in the *Official Report*.

Professor Durrani: The Royal Society of Edinburgh is pleased to provide evidence to this august committee. Our view is that the China plan provides focus and clarity and acts as an impetus for collaboration with colleagues in China. When there is an opportunity, I will talk about activity that the RSE has undertaken in line with the plan.

There is an issue to do with the plan's coherence. One has almost the feeling that stand-alone objectives have been identified, although there is an opportunity to ensure cohesion and continuity between the objectives and the activities that will help us to meet them. For example, objective 3 refers to research and development and identifies specific areas that are of interest to Scotland, whereas objective 6, which is about engagement with industry and education, is much more wide ranging and has the benefit of providing for greater engagement.

The other point that I want to make is that it is important, when such plans are drawn up, to take into account the priorities of the partnering Government. If, instead of simply identifying the opportunities for Scotland and the direction that Scotland wants to take, an effort is made to identify and understand the priorities of the partnering country, the plan will become much more effective and easier to implement.

The Convener: Before I bring in other witnesses, I should mention that we will take evidence from the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture in our third evidence session on the China plan. We will take careful note of points that witnesses make about the objectives and targets and we will raise those points with the Scottish Executive.

Ted Brocklebank: It might be useful if the witnesses would say whether they think that Scotland's strategy should fit within an overall United Kingdom strategy. Are there advantages in having a stand-alone Scottish strategy? Can we promote our small country to a very large country that has a large population? Do the Chinese understand the role of Scotland in the UK? Rather than go it alone, would it be better if Scotland's strategy fitted with the overall UK strategy?

Professor Blackmore: I have no doubt that there is merit in having a distinct Scottish strategy. Perhaps we can do both, though, and connect our strategy firmly with the UK strategy—that is important. In my experience, there is a strong recognition in China of Scotland's distinctiveness, and we should not neglect that in the strategy. I do not know whether that answers Ted Brocklebank's questions.

More generally, the overall China plan has evolved over several years, which has been a helpful and positive process. In my opinion, it is now broad and well-rounded and it probably encompasses everything that I would like to see in it. The biggest challenge is achieving the targets and stimulating new activities that will lead to that. However, the strategy that we have as our map seems right to me.

The Convener: You think that it is a good starting point.

Moira McKerracher: I agree with Steve Blackmore that there is value in having a distinctive Scottish strategy. My experience of dealing with Government officials in China is that they like strategies to be connected and they like us to be in harmony with the rest of the UK. They are pleased that the SQA is affiliated to the Scottish Government as a non-departmental public body. We explained that Scotland has a distinct education and training system, but that we sit within the wider UK. They are happy and comfortable with that.

It has taken a tremendous amount of hard work and co-operation from others to get us where we are today with student numbers in China. It is all about sustaining that, in which respect we have found the Government memorandum of understanding to be extremely valuable and helpful. Our partners perceive that there is backing from the Scottish Government for the activities that we are undertaking.

The Convener: I will come back to the points on student numbers, but I want to give others the opportunity to comment on the general objectives and targets.

Roy Cross: I, too, agree with Steve Blackmore—we should have our cake and eat it. Scotland's plan is a good thing and it fits within a UK plan of activity. The main strength—from our point of view—is that it provides a focus for joined-up engagement on the part of Scottish organisations and institutions. I think that the British Council has worked in one way or another with everybody at the table. It is important to have a plan that encourages us to work together cohesively.

The emphasis on long-term engagement is important. I am not sure how much I would bet on how the world will look in 20 years' time, but it is likely to be centred much closer to Beijing than to Edinburgh and London. Long-term engagement implies the mutual things that were mentioned earlier—we need to engage with China's needs. Perhaps we need to have a clearer understanding of Scotland's strengths.

The plan makes reasonable general reference to life sciences, for example. My knowledge of life sciences does not take me much further than that, but people who know about life sciences know that much more detailed areas of joint research and co-operation could be identified. We know that we have strength in terms of digital media and the games industry, but it is quite a small strength in terms of volume. We have to find a way of engaging with China. I was asked about India last week and I said that it is the quality that counts. It

is not a nonsense to achieve a 5 million or 1.2 billion engagement, but it is really about the quality of the engagement. Perhaps we could do a bit more research on precisely which strengths we could offer China.

The Convener: That is an interesting point. Is there a forum on which all the organisations that are represented here today can work together? Is there bilateral working? Is this meeting the first opportunity that you have all had to feed into the process as a group?

Roy Cross: Many of us came together during the consultation on the first plan and on this plan, but our daily work is more bilateral or trilateral.

Professor Houlihan: I very much welcome the plan. A nation that had an international strategy that did not include a China strategy would not have an international strategy. It is great that the plan has legs and that it is continuing.

Our work is a bit like the situation in the individual universities and colleges that are represented around the table, in that one can see that a tremendous amount of activity is going on. I do not know how many people are in China at any one time from my institution—the University of Aberdeen—which is perhaps exactly as it should be, but it hardly gives the institution a China strategy. Therein lies the interesting challenge. Lots of activity is going on, some of which is uncontrolled. That activity is done by different institutions, which are usually in competition. At the same time, people are talking about Scotland and the UK, quality of education, undergraduate programmes and post-graduate programmes. We have many things in common.

We all realise that we cannot develop the Scotland brand on our own. Although the plan has some generalisations and some great ideas, it needs to go a little bit further on how it can deliver. A good question to ask is: What is distinctive about Scottish education? There is the four-year undergraduate degree, the one-year masters degree—which is extraordinarily successful across the world, but not distinctive—and there is the three-year PhD, which is not very distinctive either. We therefore need to work together on the messages.

The more opportunities institutions are given to join cross-institution visits, meetings or activities, the better, because the more often we meet and talk—these are rare occasions, in my experience—and exchange ideas, the better used to working together we will be. That spirit of co-operation is developing between some Scottish universities with regard to pooling and other initiatives. It would be great to see it develop on the international front.

10:45

The Convener: Before I bring Professor Durrani back in, perhaps Professor Duckett wants to comment.

Professor Duckett: I agree that China is central for higher education in Scotland. It is already central for recruitment, and it will become increasingly central for research. I am glad to see the China plan and I am pleased that there is a strong place for higher education in it.

The plan is a good starting point, in a way, but we need to do much more. The cross-party group on China in the Scottish Parliament is a useful forum, but more could be done to bring people together. I would like to see a bit more cohesion and interlinking between higher education and the business objectives—I think that that issue has already been raised—and between school education and higher education. I would also like what has been done in schools and higher education to be followed through to develop capacity in relation to China. Much more can be done to ascertain how those aspects can be mutually enhancing and how we can foster our engagement with China through them.

Professor Durrani: It is clear that universities compete in undergraduate programmes, but models of university collaboration are increasingly emerging that reinforce each university's strengths. In October we established, under the aegis of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the China-Scotland signal image processing research academy. We established it because it is important to take on board specific areas. More important, the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China has identified that research activity as having a high priority. The academy includes seven of the top-notch Chinese universities and four Scottish universities. The objective is to collaborate on research directions, school and staff exchanges and—more important—to provide a pipeline so that Chinese industries that work with Chinese universities can collaborate with Scottish universities and industries, and vice versa. That process will provide a value chain from industry and the universities to the subject areas that are relevant for collaboration with industrial partners. As I said, the Royal Society of Edinburgh has put together the model for a specific subject area, but we expect it to be replicated for other subjects.

The Convener: Thank you. The next point is on what the China plan means for the witnesses' organisations. I ask Professor Livingston to speak on the general objectives and targets.

Professor Livingston: I welcome the China plan. It is important that Scotland has a distinctive plan. I say that from the point of view of our work

in Learning and Teaching Scotland because we are embedding the work on Confucius classrooms in the curriculum for excellence. The colleagues with whom we work in China appreciate that approach and our use of the all-schools intranet—called glow—to connect different classrooms. As colleagues have said, how Scotland's China plan is connected to the UK plan is important for us.

I want to follow up on Roy Cross's comment about joining up. I hope that the plan will help our ability to join up, because a number of us are working on similar development initiatives on China. It is important that we have the opportunity to join together on those initiatives because we are a small country.

The Convener: I can envisage this morning's evidence being made use of. We could perhaps build it into our recommendations.

I was very impressed by the written submission from the Confucius institute for Scotland, so it would be good to hear from Frances Christensen.

Frances Christensen: I am glad that you were impressed—the submission was written at very short notice.

I can talk about the Confucius institute in relation to Scotland having a strategy that is independent of that of the UK. I think the ministry and Hanban have welcomed the opportunity to work on a nationwide basis through the Confucius institute, which has been established to work as the only such institute in Scotland for a period of years. That is a challenge for the institute, as we need to build effective relationships and find ways to deliver our remit Scotland-wide. It is recognised by Hanban that there is value in that type of operation, which allows us to be more strategic in our thinking and more co-operative in working together. The fact that we have been given exemplar status at the outset is due to our having a combined strategy that pulls together the strands of learning in higher education, in schools, in the evolution of teaching materials and in teaching staff. The Confucius institute would say that there is a real strength in having a separate Scottish strategy that is also definitely linked to the UK strategy. The Prime Minister's initiatives cannot be ignored.

Jim Hume: It would be interesting to hear organisations' views on what the difficulties are in creating links with China. Obviously, if we can recognise the difficulties, we might be able to address them, which might involve linking our education systems. Are there any early ideas about where the opportunities exist? Is there great demand for particular types of education? Could we fill that gap, either in this country or by migrating our provision to China?

The Convener: Does anyone want to comment on that? Does Michelle Grimley have any thoughts on that?

Jim Hume: I should have asked the person beside me.

Michelle Grimley: As Jim Hume said, he could have just asked me.

Like many people around the table, my experience of working in China goes back over many years. Given that the Chinese do not even have a word for “Scotland”—I think “Sugelan” is as close as they get—it is very important that the Scottish Government’s China plan links in with the UK plan. Obviously, whisky is important to China, so that is something that the plan should help to promote.

I have worked hard with the colleges to move development opportunities for vocational education, training and skills, which are very close to my heart. However, it is very difficult for the college sector to make links in China. There have been some fantastic winning opportunities—Elmwood College’s work on golf is a fantastic model—but the general college point of view is that such things are extremely difficult. Yes—it is easy to make links in terms of memorandums of understanding, but we find that development to the next stage is very difficult. Huge investments can be made for very little return, so many people in the college sector are no longer keen to engage.

The Convener: That is a point that we want to consider. We have spoken a bit about higher education. Perhaps Morag Arnot can talk to us about the culture and the arts side of things. What are her feelings about the objectives and the targets?

Morag Arnot: The Scottish Arts Council has been hugely active internationally for only a relatively short time. We are driven by our aim of supporting artists and arts organisations to fulfil their creative and business potential. Until recently, that was the driver for our international exchanges and for our international work in general. The comments that have been made about the need to work more in partnership across Scotland to address specific objectives in the China plan present a slightly new challenge to our organisation.

As is mentioned in our written evidence, we have recently been involved in the very successful trip that a number of dance organisations made in China under the connections through culture part of the China plan. That will require quite a lot of follow-up work. We are also doing research in the visual arts. For exactly the same reasons, that work will be dependent for further development on the connections through culture funding stream. Work is going on and will continue on that basis.

If objective 7 is about culture adding value to other activities that colleagues around the table are doing as well as to business connections, that presents challenges to the arts community. Obviously, as with the colleges, it is very expensive and costly for arts organisations to present work in China. In some instances, there are challenges in translation and understanding.

At previous strategy meetings with the Government, there were discussions about trying to find out what Scottish publishers are doing about translations into Mandarin and so on, which also applies to the film community. We can get the best of Scottish culture to be understood only if, for example, films are subtitled. There are opportunities and challenges in that. In the future, however, the main way to add value to the best of Scottish culture, and to make a bigger impact, would be to work in partnership with colleagues who are around this table.

The Convener: You have led us into what the clerks have identified as the next topic for discussion, which is what the plan means for each of your organisations. What are the benefits of the plan? Are there any weaknesses, or anything that you feel we could raise on your behalf that would allow better connectivity?

Professor Duckett: One of the issues relates to the point that was just made about the differences and the difficulties of working in China. I have done work in relation to China for the past 25 years. Relationships are built up over long periods. We welcome things like the memorandum of agreement because such high-level agreements can be useful and can give people in education institutions in China support to make moves and to build relationships. However, when relationships between people who have a common interest happen, they happen from the bottom up. It is hard to direct that kind of thing from the top.

One of the key things that the Scottish Government could do that would benefit Scottish universities is to provide more support for scholarships, and for bringing the best researchers to the UK from China. We can build really good relationships with future researchers that way. In my experience, doctoral students and—to a certain extent—masters students are the people with whom we can build those long-term relationships. There is currently a dearth of scholarships. It is hard for us to compete with places such as the United States: there is a perception in China that the US is the place to go because that is where the scholarships are.

Moir McKerracher: I would echo that. In 2003, the SQA was invited to partner an international agency of the Ministry of Education in China. The agency aims to send Chinese students to universities overseas and to bring students back to

China, but it wanted to find a way of cutting the cost of Chinese students going overseas. It liked the higher national diploma model, and the fact that it could offer HNDs in Chinese universities, and then send the students to the UK or other English-speaking countries to top up to bachelors or masters degrees. It could save a couple of years' fees and living expenses—a significant amount—by offering that prestigious qualification in China.

There was competition from other awarding bodies outside Scotland to offer the programme, but we were delighted to secure it. We want to attract as many students as possible. In this case, the students want to go to higher education institutions. However, the challenge is that the excellent Scottish four-year degree has to compete with the three-year degree in England. The students are topping up to a bachelors, which is a one-year top-up in England compared with a two-year top-up in Scotland—students and their parents must weigh up the costs of that—and then going on to do a masters degree.

There are incentives. It is hugely important that the HND has been included as part of the fresh talent scheme. That differentiates us from the rest of the UK and has given impetus to the qualification. We want to incentivise students, and we are encouraged by our partners to think that students now want to come to Scotland to do a Scottish qualification, and that they will learn about Scotland as they do it. We need to use all means possible to differentiate our quality offer with incentives such as scholarships, prizes and the fresh talent scheme. Such elements are hugely important to securing students to come here.

11:00

Professor Durrani: The China Scholarship Council offers about 6,000 scholarships to Chinese students on a highly competitive basis. It has special arrangements with some countries—for example, it has made a block commitment to send Chinese scholars to Germany on the basis of a mutual arrangement between the German and Chinese Governments, which provides a focus for measures of that order. The committee might want to progress such a measure.

The Scottish Government has issued a discussion document on the Sino-Scottish scholarship scheme. It would be good for that to come to fruition.

The uptake and promotion of the UK-India education and research initiative have been successful. The initiative involves significant sums for long-term collaboration between individual institutions or groups of institutions in the UK and India. Would a scheme on such lines with China

and which involved significant pump-priming funds be helpful? I understand that Germany is talking about investing several million dollars in collaboration with China.

Those are just some lessons that the committee might want to bear in mind.

The Convener: Those comments are helpful.

Before bringing in Professor Blackmore and Roy Cross, I will call one of my colleagues to speak, because the witnesses might be able to respond to his comments.

Jamie Hepburn: I appreciate the opportunity to participate. I will make a specific point. Paragraph 14 of “The Scottish Government’s Plan for Engagement with China” says:

“Scottish Ministers will take the opportunity to raise with appropriate senior Chinese figures concerns about Human Rights in China. We will encourage Scottish organisations to engage in programmes in China which are designed to have positive impact on human rights.”

Will the witnesses comment on that aim? What role, if any, do organisations that are engaged in programmes in or with China think that they have in respect of human rights?

Objective 1 of the plan is to increase learning about China in Scottish schools. Should a warts-and-all approach be taken to that? Should the human rights angle be included? That question is directed particularly to Professor Livingston, because the Hanban has been involved in the Confucius classroom hubs. Has that created any conflict of interest?

The Convener: Before colleagues respond to Jamie Hepburn, I call Professor Blackmore to talk about the previous point.

Professor Blackmore: We were asked about the plan’s benefits for institutions. The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh has a clear idea of what it plans to do in China, but the Government’s plan helps us by identifying many potential partners. My strong view is that opportunities exist for science, arts, gardens and all aspects of culture to be presented together as culture—they are strong in Scotland and in China. I am involved in Edinburgh College of Art’s board and I know that the college is exploring opportunities to take postgraduate students to China to do fieldwork. One big benefit of the plan is the ability to meet others and add value to what we were going to do on our own.

Picking up on the earlier point that quality generates a lot of interest, I have found that we are so much in demand that we simply cannot respond to every opportunity. We have to be highly selective. I seem to spend a lot of time saying to people in China, “We’d love to do this or that, but we can’t.”

Another significant benefit of the plan is its endorsement of the importance of our work in China. Although the sponsoring Government department might not think such work to be a high priority for an NDPB in the rural affairs and environment portfolio, what we are doing on the other side of the world nevertheless fits in with Scottish strategies in a different way.

In addition to expressing our views on why we think that the plan is so useful and why we are so keen to help to take it forward, I strongly endorse the comments by Professor Duckett and others about the benefits of scholarships. Although opportunities to follow up contacts in China often arise, vehicles for doing so do not really exist, so investing in a mechanism would be the most efficient use of funding. Again, as Professor Duckett pointed out, developing long-term personal contacts in specialist fields pays dividends.

I hesitate to attempt any response to the desperately complex and political issue of human rights, but I might be able to provide a perspective on the subject. When, about a month ago, I was in Sichuan province discussing climate change with a group of young students from Sichuan University, I found them to be excited and somewhat angry about the perception generated in the western media, especially in the run-up to the Olympic games, about the human rights challenge that modern China faces. I point out, for what it is worth, that those young students felt that there might have been a problem 20 or 30 years ago. They also said, "Look, you're from the UK. You can't talk." In fact, a number of people in China have said that to me. The invasion of Iraq always comes up in such conversations.

Anyone who treads in that landscape has to be brave. Of course we have to continue to raise and press human rights issues, but we have to do so in a way that is quite hard to achieve. Whenever such issues are raised in China, we are all put on the spot as though we are political leaders—which, mercifully, I am not.

The Convener: Roy Cross will respond to the point about scholarships.

Roy Cross: As far as human rights are concerned, people might accuse me of naivety, but I think that the answer is more contact between young people in particular. After all, you cannot control what young people say to each other. More knowledge will lead to more understanding and, perhaps, the development of shared values.

With regard to scholarships, we are developing with the Government a collaborative PhD scheme; although it is quite small, it is a start. However, I take the point about bigger initiatives such as the

UK-India education and research initiative, which we manage in India. Until a few weeks ago, when the economic situation became a bit more complicated, we were quite seriously thinking about a Chinese equivalent to that scheme. We now need to resolve certain match funding issues for such a scheme, but such initiatives bring things together and ensure coherence in a very powerful way.

I hope that my remark about the situation 20 years hence was not seen as glib or throwaway. I simply do not think that in 20 years' time there will be many Chinese students in Scotland; most college education will be conducted in China, and the students who will be here will be studying at a fairly advanced postgraduate level and carrying out joint research in specific areas of mutual interest. Over the next 20 years, we have to establish the kind of strong institutional partnerships in, for example, signal processing that Professor Durrani referred to, to ensure that Scotland gets its share of this huge powerhouse of Chinese research.

Michelle Grimley: I make a plea for scholarships for undergraduate vocational education. There is nothing out there for colleges in that respect, and I ask Roy Cross to put the issue on the agenda.

The Convener: Before I let Professor Livingston respond, I will bring in Jim Hume. He has had his name down for quite a while now.

Jim Hume: I wanted to comment on Moira McKerracher's remarks, but Roy Cross appears to have raised the issue again. Campuses in Scotland are limited in the number of students they can take, but distance learning presents great opportunities. China is certainly some distance away. Is there a great drive to promote distance learning? Has thought been given to some of our educational institutions taking advantage of the opportunity to teach from here, via the internet?

The Convener: Professor Livingston may want to respond to that point.

Professor Livingston: I will respond to a number of comments that have been made.

On human rights, our work in relation to China sits within the international education part of the curriculum for excellence. Education on human rights—in China and other parts of the world—is part and parcel of international education and fits in with our balanced approach to developing responsible, informed global citizens, which is our aim for our young people.

As we develop the Confucius classrooms, it is important that we do not raise expectations about what we can provide. If we are to provide good-quality teaching of Chinese language and culture,

we must have the teachers to do so. As we develop the hubs and create interest among pupils and local authorities around Scotland, we must ask ourselves whether we have the ability, the teachers and the quality of teaching to sustain that development over time. It is also important that schools have good-quality resources, to enable teaching to be put in place. Although the Hanban provides a good range of resources, it is important that they should be relevant to our education system and suitable for use by Scottish pupils.

In my written evidence, I mentioned that the Hanban is particularly interested in glow, which is the safe and secure intranet for schools in Scotland. We made a presentation on glow to representatives of the Hanban, who were so interested that within a few weeks they were back in Scotland for further presentations on the system, how it works and what it can do to provide schools with opportunities to link together. We had the opportunity to offer them information on the infrastructure of glow, rather than the technical aspects of the system—from the questions that they asked us, it was clear that they understood those. They were much more interested in how we had set up the infrastructure, relations between schools and opportunities for people to work together.

The Convener: You have made some important points, especially in relation to good support, resources and the quality of teaching. I was surprised to read in the evidence that has been submitted that 14 local authorities have expressed an interest in setting up hubs. Your comments beg the question, do we still need to build up the quality of teaching? Does the fact that you raised the issue indicate that we do?

Professor Livingston: The 14 authorities that responded to our request for expressions of interest indicated how much they were doing already. Those authorities either have school links in place or have established Chinese language teaching in their schools. It is important to sustain that development. The current number of teachers is just about adequate for the beginning stages—the very small steps that we have made—but we are generating more interest and will need to raise the number quickly.

11:15

Ted Brocklebank: The issue of scholarships was raised. Should scholarships be fairly widespread, across all the disciplines that we offer in Scotland, or should we focus on aspects of our culture or academic background that are most attractive to China? Countries throughout the world are trying to engage with China at a fairly high level, in universities and elsewhere. We have

to find distinct areas in which Scotland can offer particular skills and knowledge.

At one end of the scale, Michelle Grimley mentioned the remarkable work that Elmwood College has done through its golf course management courses. I happen to know a bit about that, as I live in that part of the world. The programme has been successful and has spread out into the local community, as the students have taken local jobs to help to pay their way. The programme seems to be growing and expanding, and has involved the Royal and Ancient Golf Club in sending equipment to China. It is a fascinating area for the Chinese; they are hugely interested in it.

At the other end of the scale, during a recent meeting of the cross-party group on China, I discussed the opportunities in relation to the development of offshore oil and gas technology. Scotland—in particular, universities such as the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen—has specific knowledge in that area. I know that the pattern of Chinese oil and gas exploration has not so far been particularly encouraging, but there is deeper water and there are other prospects. The Robert Gordon University and others should perhaps be more involved in creating scholarships, so that their expertise can be developed and Scottish knowledge and background information can be taken to China, and the Chinese can come here to pick it up. Oil and gas technology is one of our specialisms. We also have particular skills in medicine and other areas that would be particularly attractive to the Chinese.

The Convener: I think Professor Houlihan wants to comment on that, before I bring in Alex Neil.

Professor Houlihan: This discussion is broad ranging, and we are hearing that there are wide differences between the schools agenda, the higher national certificate and higher national diploma agenda, the four-year undergraduate programme and the three-year PhD. We have hardly touched on the one-year taught masters, which is extraordinarily successful in the UK and Scotland, and which addresses the point about oil and gas.

We have been talking mainly about scholarships at PhD level. We have been involved with the China Scholarship Council for four years. The council pays for students' travel and living expenses, and the university waives their fees, which are in the region of £12,000 a year. Each scholarship costs us about £40,000, and we have had 20 of them, so it is a lot of money. I imagine that the Sino-Scottish studentship scheme might be exactly the same: the university waives the

fees, and another organisation pays for the travel and expenses.

The PhD students who take the scholarships are highly selective. They look for the top universities—or the top supervisors and the specific topics—and they search throughout the world, including Germany. They will come to Scotland if they like the look of the academic and they can strike a good balance on the project. It is all about academic excellence, an individual's reputation and so on.

The scholarships should be much valued, and they are open to everybody at the moment—anybody can form a relationship with the China Scholarship Council. If we carried out a head count of those scholarship students who are studying in Scotland, we would be surprised—Edinburgh has at least 10 that I know of, and I know about my own students, but I do not know how many are coming to Scotland. Professor Durrani mentioned 6,000 scholarships—I think that there are 7,500 a year throughout the world.

We need sectorisation: particular points need to be considered in relation to particular areas. The taught postgraduate courses—the one-year masters, combined with one year in China—are enormously successful. If we include the right product, such as oil and gas, subsea technology or other current topics, the students come in large numbers. Most of our Chinese students are postgraduates rather than undergraduates, and they are seeking a top-up education of high quality.

I do not think that we will ever give away scholarships for taught postgraduates. It is a sellers' market—people will come and pay £10,000, £12,000 or £13,000 in fees—and we are very good at it. Institutions have to balance a number of things. We can give away £40,000 for each PhD student, but we also want to do other things. A bilateral relationship can bring all the things together, so we can take HND-trained students and do two plus two or one plus one or PhDs. That is an interesting plan, but it only works with one institution at the moment.

I have gone on a bit, but it is important to understand the different things that we are talking about, which involve different markets and different problems.

The Convener: That is a good point.

Alex Neil: Building on what Professor Houlihan and Ted Brocklebank said, I would like to make three points.

My first point is about the need to take a strategic view of our relationship with China, recognising that we are a small country of 5 million people while it is a growing country of 1.2 billion.

China is also a huge country geographically. I agree with what Roy Cross said about taking a long-term perspective. There are different strands, one of which is exporting Scottish education and learning to China. That export market is being exploited, but I suspect that it has a lot more potential than we are managing to tap into at the moment, albeit that in 20 years the export potential of Scottish education will be radically different from today. We need to build on research collaboration in industry and science, and we have heard about how there is much that our people can learn from going to China—and other countries such as India—and building links. The committee must take a strategic view and perhaps emphasise the medium to long term. I suspect that much of the short-term agenda is already fixed.

That brings me to my second point, which started off with the convener's question on whether there is a formal group for people involved in China; the answer was no. Should there be such an overarching group? Working with the Scottish Government and covering the various sectors—perhaps with sector sub-groups—the group could share best practice and intelligence about China and see whether we can be more effective throughout all sectors. Is there a need for a more formal structure at a Scottish level? Would that be beneficial and, if so, what format should it take? We should bear in mind that today's meeting has a public sector, learning and education bent. We will talk to the private sector, industry and commerce at a later meeting.

My third point is that it is clear, from the excellent written submissions and today's oral evidence, that there are many links between Scotland and China in the education and learning, and research and science sectors. I suspect that the same is true for trade, industry and technology. However, the parliamentary links are more or less non-existent. If we want to pursue the issue seriously and act as a support to the groups that are represented round the table, we need to consider how to build more political links between Scotland and China. Some Government agencies, such as Scottish Development International, have a presence in China, but at a political level, notwithstanding the occasional ministerial visit, we have no systematic linkages between the political class in Scotland, as represented by the Parliament and its add-ons, and the political class in China. Such linkages would also help to address some of the issues that Jamie Hepburn raised.

The Convener: The Scottish Government's plan includes an aspiration that a stakeholder group will be established, although I do not think that a timescale is attached to that.

Alex Neil: We could ask for feedback on that.

The Convener: It would be useful for the witnesses to give their views on that and say whether it would be helpful.

Professor Blackmore: I would certainly find such a group helpful. To pick up on a theme that Professor Durrani mentioned at the outset, I think that we need to get better at listening to what our counterparts and others in China are interested in doing. One real benefit of such a forum would be that it could capture, as this committee is doing today, the experiences and evidence that each of us in our different roles can bring back to Scotland. I suspect that we do not have a good mechanism for sharing and building on those experiences. In addition to such a forum being useful for planning future work, I emphasise that it could perform an intelligence-gathering role from those of us who spend time in China.

The Convener: Such a group could be about sharing good practice and experience.

Alex Neil made a point about parliamentary engagement. I am not sure how many people round the table have been to China, but I know that not many of the committee members have—in fact, I do not know whether any of them has. *[Interruption.]* Ted Brocklebank has. Have any of the witnesses had any parliamentary engagement in their visits to China?

Perhaps we could deal with the other point first.

Alex Neil: Ted went to see how capitalism is working.

Moir McKerracher: Alex Neil asked whether a formal forum on China should be established. With the publication of the Government's framework for international activity, we have an excellent opportunity to review the groups that exist to co-ordinate activity—certainly education and lifelong learning activity. There are quite a number of such groups and, although we do not come together in a China forum, I am sure that most of us meet in other fora, such as engaging with the schools directorate. We have a lifelong learning group, and the British Council in Scotland convenes various groups. Could we have one forum that had priority countries and into which people could dip as per their interests or is there another way of streamlining engagement? We meet one another all the time in different fora, but with different focuses. China is a strong focus for Scotland, but India is shaping up to be one, too.

There are other agendas and there is a lot to be gained from an overarching view. In a lifelong learning group, some of us recently judged bids for the international lifelong learning strategic fund. Some of those bids were about engagement in China and marketing the different models for achieving higher education, such as going through an HND on to a degree or into a masters.

Government is funding many good projects, and that group had a nice overview of them. We can all tap into those projects, enhance them and add value to them. Bringing things together like that is a good idea.

Professor Duckett: Kay Livingston mentioned capacity building, which is really important. I talked about the need for schools and higher education institutions throughout Scotland to make links and work together to build capacity in relation to China. It is crucial that we train people up, starting in school and bringing them right through so that we have people who can train the future generations. The centre for social science research that we have set up—it is a pan-Scotland centre, which brings together people in universities throughout Scotland—is keen to help with capacity building.

Only last week, Kay Livingston and I were at a conference on teaching about China in Scotland. Things are starting to happen, but it would be useful if the Scottish Government would help by creating links and helping us to build capacity. That should be an important dimension of Scotland's China strategy. It will not happen on its own, because Chinese is not an easy language to learn. We have some capacity—what Scotland has been able to do, and is doing, in schools compares very well with England, for example—but we need to keep investing in it.

My second point relates to what Ted Brocklebank said about focus, what we should do and how Scotland can make the most of what it has. That is an important point, but we do not want to be too top down and directive about it because it is hard to map what we can offer China. What does China need? It is a big place and it needs a lot. However, Scotland has much to offer across a range of matters.

11:30

It is problematic that the China plan focuses very much on certain sciences. Social scientists in Scotland are trying to build relationships with Chinese universities, but we find it a bit harder to get the Scottish Government's support for such links, because the focus is on life sciences, for example. Social science is not an area that it is obvious that Scotland can market—unlike golf courses—but we have huge capacity and Scotland enjoys international excellence in social science research, which is underdeveloped in China, so there is a huge opportunity to get in and work together to put something back into China.

I welcome the focus, but things must be allowed to rise from the bottom. When the focus is defined at the top, problems are created because areas are excluded and opportunities are prevented from developing.

Ted Brocklebank: I absolutely agree. It is about winking out areas in which it is not immediately apparent that we have something to offer.

Despite what Alex Neil thinks, I did not go to China to learn about capitalism; I went to make a film, in co-production with a Norwegian broadcaster. Perhaps this is for the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen to consider, but it seemed to me that there are huge opportunities for co-operation—and not just on budgets and so on. China has a massive national archive of film and images and is desperately keen to become involved with companies and television outlets from elsewhere. It is odd how—lo and behold—one comes across opportunities that might not be immediately apparent. I would have thought that there are independent producers in Scotland who would dearly love Scottish Enterprise or someone else to work on their behalf in China to make connections.

Of course the media sector in Scottish colleges and universities is growing. That is another area in which we have expertise, which might well be capable of development.

Morag Arnot: A meeting took place recently with the Scottish Government to consider the role of culture and how we move things forward. A key point was that organisations such as the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen should work much more closely with SDI.

Co-production in general is probably worth investigating across all the international spheres, as a way of securing mutual benefit for both parties and allowing for the bottom-up work that Jane Duckett talked about. For example, the dance visit that took place recently will lead to co-productions between Dance Base and organisations with which contact was made.

Professor Livingston: I would find it extremely helpful if there was a group that could bring together ideas in the way that Moira McKerracher described. Nearly everyone who is giving evidence today has met the other witnesses on some occasion. However, this is an important moment: the China plan is in place and we must co-ordinate how we take it forward. Such engagement would not necessarily go on for a long time, but it is important that we co-ordinate activity at the beginning.

I was part of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning's delegation to China. It was important that she was present when we signed our agreement with the Hanban, because that sent a clear signal that we were serious about what we were doing in Scottish education. We also sent a message that we want to act strategically and ensure that the agreement is not just about eight classrooms in eight schools but will lead to

opportunities in schools throughout Scotland. Such strategic involvement is important for us.

Alex Neil talked about exporting Scottish education to China. Our colleagues in China are interested in and ask many questions about pedagogical aspects such as our approach to enterprise and creativity and our use of technology to improve learning and teaching in Scottish schools. We can certainly offer help on such matters; how we do so is important.

Professor Durrani: I want to reinforce some of the points that are being made. China is clearly a large country, but it is also well organised and managed. Its five-year plans provide clear information about priorities. If we want to progress a China plan, it is important for us to recognise China's priorities and match its interests.

Something that has just occurred to me—and I am sure that he will not mind me volunteering him—is that Lord Wilson, the incoming president of the RSE, is an old China hand who speaks fluent Mandarin. That might be something to bear in mind.

Later this month, the president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences is coming to Scotland. That reinforces our relationship with China. It would be useful to give him some messages about the wider interests of the Scottish Government.

To take on board Alex Neil's point of view, we found the Scottish Development International office in China to be helpful. It is very good, positive and well connected with industry. If there is a need for engagement with industries or to tie together numerous industries, that office is helpful and useful; colleagues might want to bear that in mind if we want to develop relationships there.

The Convener: You are expressing a clear view that the plan is a good thing, but it is a starting point. We need to co-ordinate a more strategic approach at national level and to do that early so that we can make maximum use of the opportunities.

Frances Christensen: Before holding my current post, I worked with Interactive University for almost three and a half years. In that time, we found that universities and colleges in China were interested in taking on a transnational model of Scottish education. The difficulty lay with supply, which is why many congratulations should go to the Scottish Qualifications Authority on the HND and the work that was done to enable delivery of HNDs to the extent that China has enjoyed.

There is a shortage of further and higher education provision in China, so Scotland has the opportunity to find a way forward. We have the glow project at schools level and the SCHOLAR programme, and there is an initiative between

Napier University and various other colleges, which put together a life sciences programme in which content was captured. We could derive value from co-operative working and the capturing of content rather than face-to-face delivery.

A forum would be an effective way in which to review and plan for the way forward. The China now in Scotland programme came together through an advisory group. It was informed at the outset, but it ran itself once we had received all the inputs and developed awareness; there was a willingness to give support in kind, if not in cash.

The Convener: We are running a bit short of time. I will ask a summing-up question, and then committee colleagues can make a final point. We are saying that the China plan has been useful. It seems to have stimulated engagement between the panellists and partners in China. We have also talked about a stakeholder group. Looking to the future, what could assist your organisations to achieve their objectives?

Roy Cross: As we said in our written evidence, there should be a bit more analysis. Perhaps Scottish Enterprise could do something to map Scotland's commercial and academic strengths on to Chinese opportunity as expressed in its five-year plans; that would be valuable. The team is quite small—only two or three—and it is difficult for someone to do much more than be a desk officer.

I will fly one more medium-term kite. I came to Scotland from Croatia—a country of 5 million people with lots of highlands and islands and pride in its strong drink. I talked to the Croatians about their language learning strategy. At one point, they said that they would seriously try to have, in 20 years, a generation of young Croatians who had Mandarin, Arabic and Spanish. When I came to Scotland, I made a similar proposal to colleagues here. The initial response was favourable and people thought it a good idea, but then they began to consider problems around the number of teachers who are already being trained to teach other languages and the number who teach other languages in schools. However, there should be a bold strategy with money behind it to ensure that, in 20 years, young Scots can engage with China.

The Convener: That is an interesting point.

Frances Christensen: Language is the most strategic issue for us. I hope that the work that we can do to facilitate learning the language will merit investment and support from a range of people. However, as Professor Durrani said, the education and business sides are not linked closely enough, which reduces our capacity to deliver. For example, support from all sectors for the China now in Scotland programme was strong, but the support from the business sector was pathetic.

The Convener: That is interesting. Perhaps my colleagues and I can explore that at our next meeting.

Professor Livingston: To reiterate my earlier comments, the level of interest in China in Scottish schools is high; the question is how we meet the expectation with good-quality teaching. I concur with Frances Christensen's view that linking education to the business and industry sector is important. Already, young people in fourth and fifth year at school have gone out to Shanghai for work experience then changed the degree course that they had intended to take in order to study Chinese language and international business. In terms of the steps that they have taken in their careers, doing a work placement in a Shanghai business was a life-changing experience for those young people. That kind of linkage is important for our young people in Scotland.

Professor Blackmore: Frances Christensen's point about the China now in Scotland festival prompts me to make two points. I agree that it was difficult to get business engagement with and support for the programme's activities. Curiously, though, most of the Royal Botanic Garden's activity in China is sponsored by China-based businesses, so there must be potential for such engagement to work. The festival provided valuable focus and was a forum in which quite a few of us met and interacted. Moreover, it was striking and important that this year's Edinburgh lectures series focused on China.

Next year is the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. I know from the Chinese consulate that the Chinese are planning significant activities because 2009 is a big celebratory year for them. We should bear that in mind as an opportunity and think of what could be done to capture that moment.

The Convener: That is a good idea. We will certainly take note of it.

Michelle Grimley: I want to pick up briefly on Roy Cross's comments about colleges being in-country in China in 20 years' time. A significant issue for us is that our colleges are not recognised in China. They are not on the Government's list of recognised providers, so we would strongly appreciate support in addressing that issue. Having such recognition would help the college sector to move forward on delivering in-country. Further, we would like to link with the skills agenda in China. We have done research on what is required. For example, basic skills for automotive engineering and servicing are a huge area, given the staggeringly high numbers of cars on the roads in China. It is important for colleges to get assistance to facilitate teaching such skills.

The Convener: That is interesting—thank you. Does Moira McKerracher have any final points to bring to the committee's attention?

11:45

Moira McKerracher: One of the success factors that enabled us to secure quality delivery of HND in China—thank you, Frances Christensen—was embedding quality assurance and capacity building from the start. Indeed, that was welcomed, and Chinese universities now expect it.

We have worked with Scottish colleges to provide that, but it is expensive. If the programme continues to grow, we can help to pay for it, but pump-priming or partnership projects similar to those in the Malawi project would be useful to allow Scotland to continue to provide expertise and capacity building, which are in great demand in China. There could be a great synergy.

At a micro level, the teacher training has been fairly successful in relation to human rights. Chinese students are achieving the same standards as Scottish students are in the HND. One feature in the teacher training programme that came as a surprise to Chinese lecturers was the student feedback and evaluation. The lecturers were not used to being evaluated by their students so, at first, there was quite a lot of resistance to that, but it has now been embraced as part of the programme.

There have been small steps, or microsteps. The approach is all about contact and engagement. We would welcome any support that we can get to engage with partners and colleges to provide more capacity building for our partner institutions in China. As a non-departmental public body, we have operational difficulties collecting fees out of China. There are some small things that our sponsor department in the Government could help us with on that, but I understand that it is considering that.

Morag Annot: I will back up some of the points that have been made. Education in relation to culture is in some respects a big industry in China. The same sharing of intelligence and opportunities and capacity building are required to get Scotland's arts and culture showing up in China. That requires the same development input. We look for education and business partners and the Government to appreciate that getting the high-quality cultural product seen in China will not come from nothing. Resources are required, either through education or business, but the added value that we would achieve would make the process worth while. The creative industries are highlighted in the Government's plan, as are specific art forms such as music. The issue is how to raise awareness. We know that China has the

highest level of illegal downloads in the world. The intellectual property issue is a big challenge for us.

A small ad: Will Hutton, who has written a book about China, is part of our contribution to the Edinburgh lectures series in March. I will send you all invitations.

The Convener: Thank you—we will look forward to that.

Professor Duckett: I will finish by encouraging the Scottish Government to invest in exchanges and capacity building. I welcome the idea of a forum that brings people together, perhaps to have more input into policy on China across the Scottish Government.

The Scottish centre for Chinese social science research has a lot of capacity in relation to Chinese governance, how the Chinese Government works and public policy in China. That resource might be drawn on when particular areas of public policy, such as education policy, are considered. We would welcome any requests to provide information or to help with development, given the shortage of personnel working in the area, which Roy Cross mentioned.

Professor Houlihan: I, too, welcome the idea of a forum. Today's exchange has been valuable.

I will give two signs for the future, or straws in the wind. First, I detect an internationalisation of universities in China that is extraordinary and ambitious. Our partner universities are offering summer schools to our students free if we provide the travel. That scheme has enormous potential. They are six-week summer schools giving an introduction to the language and culture. I only wish that we could reciprocate, and with something equally as good.

I have heard people in Chinese universities say that they intend to send 30 per cent of their students overseas during the course of their undergraduate career. That is the kind of thing that one sometimes hears from ambitious United States universities, but one does not hear it very often. That is an important straw in the wind. We have talked a lot about courses and regular programmes, but the summer school exchange programmes could grow. Again, the Government could lead on that, although it might not cost that much money. We need the reception, the organisation, the visas and all the rest of it.

Secondly, we looked hard at how other Scottish universities were using recruitment offices. You can visit a number of places with a Scottish brand in Beijing alone—the first secretary, SDI and several universities have offices. We decided to set up a technology transfer office in China, staffed by two people and aimed at remediation of oil and gas conditions. I accompanied Fiona

Hyslop on her visit, which was a very good idea. We opened the office a couple of weeks ago. It will enable us to engage head to head with universities and business in China on intellectual property and other issues. I will not be at all surprised if, increasingly, institutions start to think about transferring their intellectual property abroad from Scotland in that way, instead of having offices devoted to recruitment, as has often been the case. There are other things that can be done, but only by putting our toe in the water have we discovered some of the real difficulties of doing business with China. The approach that we have taken is unusual for an HEI, but I think that more of that will follow.

I have offered the committee two straws in the wind.

The Convener: Thank you for your comments. We have learned an enormous amount this morning. Would members like to make any final points?

Patricia Ferguson: Everyone seems to welcome the idea of setting up a forum—it appears that there is enough information around the table and sufficient opportunity for that information to be exchanged to make a forum worth while. It is a rhetorical question at this stage in the morning, but would a key task for the forum be to have an eye to future-proofing policy both for individual institutions and organisations and for the Government? I am picking up Professor Houlihan's straws in the wind and a point that Roy Cross made earlier.

Jim Hume: Professor Durrani's point about the Chinese five-year plan is important. We should find out what the plan is and ensure that all the organisations that are represented here—including the committee—know that. We can have the best ideas in the world, but they will not work if they do not fit in with Chinese policy.

I was also interested in Professor Houlihan's comments. A month or two ago, Alex Neil and I were in Brussels, where people are looking towards 2025. Europe and Japan have a problem, as we will not have enough young well-educated people—we are on the decline in that respect. The more young well-educated people we can get into this country—perhaps through exchanges—the better, as some of them may stay around.

The Convener: It is interesting to share good practice—I did not know about some of the initiatives for young people that are in place. It is great that the committee, through its report, will be able to raise awareness of such issues.

Jamie Hepburn: I echo Jim Hume's comments—we should look at the Chinese five-year plan. I am delighted to hear that some

remnants of the communist system remain in China.

I return to the issue of human rights. I hope that I am not being a little unfair to everyone who is here today, but when I raised the issue it struck me that it was a bit like the elephant in the room. Very few folk responded to my invitation to comment on the Government's objective of raising concerns about human rights in China. However, it is an objective in the Government's plan, so the committee will have to consider it. We will raise the issue with the minister, but the objective includes encouraging organisations to engage with the human rights agenda, so we will need to consider how organisations can do that. Rightly, Professor Blackmore pointed out that it will be the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China next year. In eight days' time, it will be the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is equally pertinent.

The Convener: I welcome Professor Livingston's observation that the issue of human rights has been built into the curriculum for excellence to some extent, but Jamie Hepburn's point is on the record. We will look at the matter in our inquiry.

I thank everyone for their attendance. We have received such a wealth of written evidence that it has been impossible to cover everything today, but we greatly appreciate the input that you have made, both orally and through written evidence. If we have any outstanding questions on your evidence, I hope that it will be appropriate for us to contact you individually. We would like to follow up on some of your ideas and to pick up the points that have been made regarding the five-year plan, which Professor Durrani mentioned, to ensure that we build them into our inquiry.

I will suspend the meeting for five minutes to allow us to rearrange the seating.

11:55

Meeting suspended.

12:01

On resuming—

European Commission's Legislative and Work Programme

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of our approach to the European Commission's legislative and work programme. The European officer has produced an analysis of initiatives of interest to Scotland and it is proposed that, in the first instance, the committee invite the views of the Parliament's subject committees to establish a list of priorities that the officer can use in providing us with updates. Do members have any comments?

Alex Neil: I point out that, in the last paragraph on page 1, the word "principle" should be spelled "principal".

The Convener: It is recommended that we forward the paper to the subject committees and that our clerks arrange meetings with the clerks of those committees. We discussed this issue when we were in Brussels last week. There are a number of topical items that the Commission is moving on, particularly the economic crisis and the European recovery plan. It might be quite interesting to take some evidence on that issue, but it depends on what the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee is doing. We should in the first place interact with subject committees on this matter but, if they find that they do not have the scope to do any work on it, I for one would be interested in hearing about proposals in the European recovery plan. They will certainly be important to Scotland and the UK.

Alex Neil: I think that it is a bit rich for the Commission to talk about trying to bring Europe closer to its citizens, given the contempt with which it has treated the democratic process in Ireland.

Ted Brocklebank: Hear, hear.

Patricia Ferguson: I was wondering how you were going to get a comment in about that, Alex.

The Convener: We could debate that issue for another hour, although I am sure that other members will not want to do so now. If we can get a Commission member to come before the committee, you will be able to put those points to him.

I am happy for the clerks to circulate to any members who are interested a draft resolution from the Committee of the Regions on the Commission's legislative and work programme, identifying not only areas of cohesion but areas where further action should be taken. It feels, for example, that cohesion policy has not been adequately reflected as a priority.

Jamie Hepburn: How does the process work? I agree with everything set out in the paper, and I agree that we should write to the various subject committees. However, if the subject committee did not have time to consider the European recovery plan, we might want to do so fairly quickly. How would we expedite that? What is the process?

The Convener: If the committee agrees, I am happy to task the clerks with looking into that and reporting back at the next committee meeting. If members are content and the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee does not intend to consider the matter, I will be happy for us to conduct a short evidence-taking session.

Alex Neil: We could include the issue as an integral part of the discussion that we have agreed to have on the committee's role and our work programme—and the quicker we have that discussion, the better.

The Convener: Do members want to hold that discussion at the next meeting?

Patricia Ferguson: Apologies—I will not be at the next meeting.

Ted Brocklebank: I might have a problem with the next meeting, too. I might be in Easter Ross.

Alex Neil: We could make it the meeting after that. It is important for Patricia Ferguson and Ted Brocklebank to be present for that discussion.

The Convener: The decision partly depends on our approach to the European Union budget paper. The clerks already have a schedule of proposed evidence-taking sessions, including others on the China plan and the options that are set out in the EU budget paper. I will liaise with the clerks, and we will look to hold the discussion at the first meeting in the new year. I hope that, by then, we will have had a reply from the subject committees.

I am also particularly interested in Alzheimer's. When I was in Brussels last week, officials told me that there are two big issues on the Commission's health agenda for next year: cancer and Alzheimer's. That is in the legislative and work programme. With the dementia services development centre at the University of Stirling, we are well in tune with the work, and we would be well placed to make an important contribution to Commission discussions on a Europe-wide plan on Alzheimer's.

There are certainly areas of interest but, in fairness to the subject committees, we must seek their views first. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

“Brussels Bulletin”

12:07

The Convener: The next agenda item is the “Brussels Bulletin”.

Alex Neil: I am not sure whether this is covered in the “Brussels Bulletin”, but it is clear that the French have pulled a fast one in the budget on the common agricultural policy. It might be useful to draw that to the attention of the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee and ask whether it is doing any work on that. The French have blatantly used the presidency to ambush the European Community and ensure that we continue to subsidise French farmers heavily. We could look at that, because it also prejudices the outcome of the budget review. Our spending on the common agricultural policy as a share of the total budget will be only about 5 per cent less. That is still a significant amount, and it prejudices the balance of funding.

The Convener: Our next agenda item is to consider the report from the European officer on the Commission’s conference on the budget. It is clear that any flexibility in the budget in later years will depend on CAP reform, but I am not sure that the situation is tied up further than 2012. Ian Duncan reports the current status on page 5 of the bulletin, and I think that further reforms are for after then. However, it is worth keeping an eye on the issue and passing it on to the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee.

Alex Neil: My understanding was that something had been agreed for beyond 2012. We do not necessarily need to examine the issue in depth, but we should ensure that the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee is aware of it.

The Convener: One point that was raised in the Committee of the Regions resolution on the Commission’s legislative and work programme was much better co-ordination between agricultural and other policy initiatives, which involves better partnership and complementarity. There is some scope, and we can certainly consider that.

Alex Neil: We should also draw the attention of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee to the proposals to relax state aid rules on direct support for business. I have not looked at the detail, but it might give the Scottish Government some flexibility in, for example, awarding regional selective assistance and grant aid to industry. If the subject committee does not look at that, we could perhaps consider its implications.

The Convener: I would be happy to do that. It ties in with the European recovery plan and how

we assist small and medium-sized enterprises at this difficult time.

European Union Budget Review Inquiry

12:11

The Convener: The next item is Ian Duncan’s report from the conference on the EU budget. It is an interesting report that will inform our inquiry, which we will discuss next. If members have no comments on the update, do we agree to note it?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That brings the public part of the meeting to a close. I thank members of the public for their attendance.

12:12

Meeting continued in private until 12:26.

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