Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 30 January 2025

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Thursday 30 January 2025

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CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER
*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER
*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS
*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)
Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)
Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:
Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)
Roy Gardner (City of Glasgow College and Colleges Scotland)
Lesley Jackson (Universities Scotland)
Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green) (Committee Substitute)
Sarah Paterson (YouthLink Scotland)
Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan (National Union of Students Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE
James Johnston

LOCATION
The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

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[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:32]

Review of the EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the fourth meeting in 2025 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee. We have received apologies from Keith Brown, Patrick Harvie and Stephen Kerr. Jackie Dunbar will substitute for Keith Brown, and Gillian Mackay will substitute for Patrick Harvie. Welcome back, Ms Dunbar and Ms Mackay.

Our first agenda item is a continuation of our evidence taking in the second phase of our inquiry into the review of the European Union-United Kingdom trade and co-operation agreement, focusing on youth mobility.

We are delighted to be joined by Lesley Jackson, who is deputy director of policy, Universities Scotland; Roy Gardner, who is vice principal, corporate development and innovation, City of Glasgow College and is also representing Colleges Scotland; and Sarah Paterson, who is communications and public affairs manager, YouthLink Scotland. We are also joined online by Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan, who is the president of National Union of Students Scotland.

I will start with a few questions and then bring in the other members of the committee.

The first question is for Ms Paterson. I was very taken by your written submission, particularly the many quotes from the youth work sector. One of them was from Colin MacFarlane from YMCA Scotland, who said:

"While digital technology has enabled easier access to people internationally, the ability to learn face to face and experience other cultures and environments is invaluable."

You state that you are "hugely" disappointed that,

"Despite the transformative impact of international youth work",

you feel that the sector has been overlooked in the development of the wider UK programmes and the possibilities going forward.

Can you say a little more about your thoughts on that area and what you would like to see?

Sarah Paterson (YouthLink Scotland): Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence. Since the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016, YouthLink Scotland, the country's national youth work agency, has campaigned hard for the retention of the Erasmus+ programme. It is not going too far to say that there was devastation in Scotland's youth work sector when the decision was made to leave the Erasmus+ programme.

The last round of the Erasmus+ programme was worth €5 million for our youth work sector. If we had remained in the Erasmus programme, the total that we would have been able to access as a youth work sector would have been €10 million.

The replacement programmes for Erasmus—the Turing programme and the Scottish educational exchange programme—do not have specific youth work strands. It is fair to say that the benefits and impact of the Erasmus+ programme were very much in the plus of Erasmus+, which included a variety of strands. The specific youth strand was extremely beneficial to our sector.

The Turing programme has positives, but we were very disappointed to see that youth work was not written into it. One of the positives of the Turing programme is that there is additional support for people to apply. Another positive is that the programme has gone wider than Europe.

We are not aware of any youth work organisations or projects in Scotland that have managed to receive funding through Turing. I had a look at the funded projects for the past year, and I cannot see one youth work organisation across the UK that has been funded through Turing. There is the ability for youth work organisations to partner, but that does not seem to have happened.

The situation with the Scottish educational exchange programme is similar. We had a lot of discussion on that with the Scottish Government in the lead-up to the announcement of the programme. We were very clear about what we wanted to see in that. We definitely understand that the programme is a two-year pilot, but we hope that there are improvements in it, because to date, not one youth work organisation has been funded through the Scottish educational exchange programme.

Roy Gardner (City of Glasgow College and Colleges Scotland): I concur with Sarah Paterson's comments. The institution that I represent, the City of Glasgow College, has participated in Turing, but it does not have the depth and richness of benefit that Erasmus+ has had for the college sector and my institution over the years.

We have numerous international partnerships across the globe, as well as extensive partnerships in the EU. The main challenges with

Turing, as opposed to Erasmus, are that it completely misses out staff mobility and the continuing professional development element of staff building up their own capacity and learning from other institutions across the EU, but more importantly, strategic partnerships are completely lost. My institution alone has had six key action 2 projects and one key action 3 project, and the legacy of those continues on to this day, but that element is sorely missed in the Turing scheme.

The Convener: Did staff mobility come under Erasmus+ or the Comenius programme?

Roy Gardner: Staff mobility came under Erasmus+. Between 2014 and 2020, we had 189 staff who travelled. Travelling over the two years of 2021 and 2022, taking in Covid, was a challenge, but those staff benefited from it. We created 16 new learning programmes in that time, and 640 students travelled under the student mobility elements during that timeframe.

More importantly, the City of Glasgow College draws on quite a wide population across the central belt, and 38 per cent of the students who participated in the Erasmus programme were from the 20 per cent most deprived areas according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, with 98.6 per cent of people who had been involved in the Erasmus programme achieving their course. The statistics speak for themselves.

The Convener: Absolutely.

Lesley Jackson (Universities Scotland): I agree with everything that has been said so far. The lack of reciprocity is one of the main disadvantages of the Turing scheme. Generally, mobility schemes are reciprocal, so being able to send students in only one direction is a key drawback.

The higher education sector in Scotland was extremely successful through the Erasmus+ programme. As you will have seen from our submission, the sector received about 16 per cent of the funding that came to the UK, but it receives only about 8 per cent of the funding for the Turing scheme. In monetary terms, through the Erasmus+ programme that covered 2014 to 2020, the sector received, on average, about €12 million, whereas it receives only about £5 million under the Turing scheme.

The other major advantage of the Erasmus programme compared with the Turing scheme and the Scottish educational exchange programme is the longevity of the funding commitment. The Erasmus programme is a seven-year programme, so people know what they are going into at the start—they know the rules of the game and what the applications look like. At the moment, SEEP and the Turing scheme are funded annually, so there are a lot of the issues that there tend to be

with annually funded programmes, such as short application deadlines and short times to spend the money. For example, this year, SEEP awards were made in October and the money has to be spent by March. In practical terms, one of the key times of the year for the movement of students is the long summer break, but such movement will not be possible this year because of the timeline for spending the money.

There are structural issues with the Turing scheme and, to an extent, SEEP. So far, they have not been able to provide the certainty that was provided under the Erasmus programme. That affects widening access in particular. In the first year of the Turing scheme, there were quite high withdrawal rates among widening access students who wished to participate, especially in semester 1, because of late confirmation of funding awards. They were not able to pay deposits or book their travel, and their families could not step in to provide money while they waited for a grant award decision to be made, so those students were not able to participate. Although the sector has welcomed the widening access principles of the Turing scheme, things have sometimes fallen down when it has come to practical application.

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan (National Union of Students Scotland): I echo all the points that have been made in the room. The National Union of Students Scotland represents about 500,000 students and apprentices in the sector.

There is a fundamental gap in accessibility when it comes to the Turing scheme. In relation to the demographics under the Erasmus programme, Scottish youth represented 15 per cent, but there have not been those significant numbers since the Turing scheme was introduced—there has been an 80 per cent drop in the sector. As has been mentioned in relation to widening access, students from SIMD20 areas and students in further education have been disproportionately affected by the change.

We also have to keep in mind the immigration hostility that has been caused, especially with Scotland aligning itself with the wider narrative of the hostile environment that has been used by Westminster time and again. From our perspective, if we want to be sector leaders in education and in cultural exchange, we need to provide an opportunity for students to take part in reciprocal exchanges. We need students to come into our economy from different communities, because they boost our economy and our communities. I do not think that that narrative needs to be restated here.

As well as discussing timelines for applications, we should keep it in mind that Turing applications are not very accessible, because most of the

application times fall during the Easter or summer breaks. Students have to wait for a long time, and then the timelines do not align with traditional timelines in the education sector, which creates a big discrepancy.

09:45

With immigration and visa applications, you need to have confirmation of your education and the credits that you are accessing at your host university, college or other institution, so that you can apply for immigration status. Also, the student finances that you receive are not any kind of confirmation or proof of your finances as a whole for immigration purposes.

Right now, after Brexit, as an international student, I know that there is a lot of hostility plus a lot of bureaucracy when it comes to applications for migration, and students definitely face those barriers. For rural communities and widening access communities, the opportunities do not seem accessible, not only from the get-go but from a procedural point of view.

We understand that the Scottish Government introduced its educational exchange programme as promised in 2021. We are in the second phase of the trial of SEEP, but we have noticed a gap in publication. We do not see information on the success rate in the first round, and we are concerned about that.

It has been reiterated in the room that leaving Erasmus has been a grave error that needs to be reconsidered by the committee.

The Convener: Thank you. I will move to questions from committee members.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. Only 36 projects have been funded by the Scottish education exchange programme, compared to 199 for the Taith scheme in Wales. Has the Scottish Government acted quickly enough, given that the Welsh Government has had the Taith scheme operating since 2022?

Lesley Jackson: It took a long time to get SEEP off the ground: it took two and a half years from leaving Erasmus until the first stage of SEEP. The Scottish Government was right to take a test-and-learn approach. The Government has engaged with the higher education sector on development of the programme. In the first year after leaving Erasmus+, there was no student mobility. The sector felt quite strongly about that and, after feedback, it was included in year 2.

Would we have liked SEEP to be up and running earlier? Of course. Would we like it to have a bigger budget? Of course. However, there is something to be said about the consultative nature of the way that SEEP is progressing. We

would now like confirmation of when the test-and-learn phase will end. We are just about to go into year 3, and there has been quite a lot of testing and learning. It would be good to know what the plan is for the programme to be solidified in the longer term.

That comes back to the point that I made at the outset about stability and predictability. We need to know that the programme will be there, that it has the certainty of multiyear funding and that the rules of the game are well established and understood by applicants. We would always expect a bit of tweaking between years as a result of feedback and learning, which is to be welcomed. However, we would really welcome it if the programme was put on a stable footing and the Scottish Government decided to commit to it.

Neil Bibby: Are there any other thoughts on that?

Sarah Paterson: I agree with everything that Lesley Jackson has said. As I have said, our youth work sector has not, as far as we know, put in any applications. There is £10,000 available to youth work projects if they partner with a further or higher educational institution, but that has not happened. I think that the phrase "test and learn" is really important. Now that we are going into the third year, we would like a bit of research to be done to give us a bit of intelligence on why the youth work sector is not taking up an opportunity that we have publicised widely to it.

There will be a variety of reasons for that. Somebody mentioned timescales; the fact is that projects have to be delivered within seven months, and there is a tight timeline around the application process. That does not tend to suit the youth work sector, which works with some very disadvantaged young people who face very challenging circumstances. We would certainly like the opportunity to work more with the Scottish Government to find out why the approach does not seem to be working for the youth work sector, even though it has the possibility of partnering in SEEP. There is quite a lot to test and learn within that.

At the core of the matter lie equity of access and equality, given the big priority to reduce poverty and inequality in this country. In moving forward with the test-and-learn programme, I think that it is very clear that some absolutely fantastic projects have been funded with universities and colleges, and it is fantastic to see that sort of thing. I know that our adult learning colleagues are not giving evidence today, but I would say that the situation is similar for them; there was a vocational education strand of Erasmus+ that they were able to apply for and utilise. As I have said, I think that they are in a very similar position to that of the youth work sector.

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan: With regard to SEEP, we are, as I have mentioned, seeing a very big gap in the success rates that are being published, but we also know that there are limited opportunities to be part of the Europe-wide exchange network, due to Brexit. There is a big gap in awareness and accessibility, especially when it comes to our deprived and widening-access communities. Indeed, that is something that has already been highlighted.

The situation also kind of limits other opportunities for vocational training and education. I also highlight the loss of the institutional networks that we had with Erasmus+, which were a long-standing arrangement that we had with other institutions. That really hinders our chance to pioneer and partner with top universities around the globe.

We have wonderful institutions in Scotland. We definitely have funding challenges, as we know, but the biggest issue right now is the limited reciprocity, along with the administrative charges that apply. After all, students come from different demographics: students from overseas might not experience the same levels of bureaucracy. It all depends on the passport that you hold, your financial status and so on. Migration is a multifaceted and complex issue, which we really need to keep in mind.

Erasmus+ already had a network and, indeed, the support of its European network. I do not think that we can achieve that single-handedly. SEEP is definitely more than welcome as a first step, but in the long term we should really consider joining our European network again.

Roy Gardner: It is a very good question, which I will answer from the college sector perspective. The first year of SEEP bypassed the college sector but, through interventions from the Scottish Government and the team at SEEP, we had a session in which we brought all the colleges together. There are now colleges that are actively engaged in that programme, which is of much benefit to the wider college community.

I will build on Lesley Jackson's point. With the assurance of multiyear funding, the college sector can get much more engaged in the programme. Some colleges obviously serve their partnerships very well across Europe. Some are new to it, in particular the rural colleges, so SEEP is an opportunity for them to come to the table and build on the partnership network. Multiyear funding will help them to address their staffing issues and get their priorities in line.

The Convener: As someone who did their degree through Glasgow College of Technology a long time ago—I am showing my age—I am fully supportive of the college sector and what it can do in terms of articulation routes.

Is it mainly degree students who are taking part in the Government programme at the moment, or are students on other courses able to participate?

Roy Gardner: Participation is across the board. There is no restriction with regard to whether someone is doing a national qualification or a degree with us. Participation is from across the spectrum of courses.

The Convener: That is helpful.

Neil Bibby: Costs were mentioned. I think that the reluctance at the UK level to adopt or take forward Erasmus+ has been on the basis of costs. It is fair to assume, as has been mentioned, that the reason behind any prevention of Scotland adopting a scheme like Taith, which operates in Wales, has also been about the cost to the Scottish Government. I am not sure whether anyone knows of reasons other than costs for why such a scheme has not been adopted in Scotland. If there are other reasons, I am interested to hear them.

A number of witnesses have touched on the impact on disadvantaged students. Sai Viswanathan mentioned drop-out rates. In comparison with Erasmus+, has the Turing scheme provided a demographic shift to disadvantaged students? That was the ethos behind it. I am interested to get the witnesses' thoughts on that.

We have information from the House of Commons library and the Department for Education that shows that, over the past few years, the number of participating students in England has increased and that, in Scotland, it has fallen. The percentage of disadvantaged participants in Scotland has fallen from 51 per cent in 2022-23 to 45 per cent in 2024-25. In England, it has risen from 53 per cent to 55 per cent in the same period. In Wales, it has fallen from 37 per cent to 33 per cent.

Obviously, different things are happening in different countries. In comparison with Erasmus+, has the Turing scheme provided a demographic shift to disadvantaged students? Do those figures also include drop-out rates?

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan: We have definitely seen a demographic shift in a way that favours HE more than FE. However, 79 per cent of providers from the HE funding stream have had difficulty with scheme applications, compared with 23 per cent of FE providers.

There is a lack of partial funding and, especially for vocational courses, students need placements to be confirmed before they actually get the

funding. That is something that disproportionately affects students in further education.

I apologise for the fact that I am not well versed in the drop-out rates, but I would really like that information to be added to the figures.

10:00

Sarah Paterson: I mentioned the lack of uptake of Turing in the youth work sector, not just here in Scotland but across the UK. Erasmus+ gave young people in disadvantaged circumstances and not in further or higher education, school refusers and young people in very challenging circumstances living in areas of mass deprivation the opportunity to take part in international exchange, which is absolutely life changing. We know that from all our case studies and statistics from Scotland. Without figures, I would still say that if the youth work sector in Scotland and the UK is unable to access those opportunities, there has been a shift in the wrong direction.

Lesley Jackson: I agree with Sarah Paterson. The focus in Turing on widening access is welcome for the demographic of higher education students who are accessing those mobility opportunities. Sai Viswanathan made the point earlier about where the system is falling down. The principle is good, but the UK Government could do things to bolster the participation rate, such as thinking about the timing of when awards are made and support for those awards.

As a point of principle, we certainly welcome them, but alternative schemes are not able to offer the same breadth. Erasmus+ is an incredibly broad programme: it covers everything from the traditional student studying a language course and doing their time abroad, right through to sports coaches and everything in between, as Sarah Paterson articulated for the youth sector. When you think about the breadth of opportunities across the whole of Erasmus+ from a demographic perspective, and then you look at Turing, you could reasonably say that the overall demographic effect is less impactful with Turing, because it is focused on a much smaller cohort of people than Erasmus+ was.

Roy Gardner: I will build on that. The college sector obviously reaches into some of the most socially deprived areas. The beauty of Erasmus+ was that there were no barriers to those communities accessing the programme.

The demographic shift has not necessarily been in the right direction. In the new guidance that has been offered on Turing for FE students, the daily rate is going from £87 a day down to £50, which is supposed to cover travel, accommodation and subsistence. That makes the scheme completely inaccessible for FE students, let alone people from the most deprived backgrounds.

Neil Bibby: That is helpful. Thanks for your answers.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Thank you, everyone, for the questions and comments so far. Despite Brexit, inward mobility from the EU is still possible, with 20 per cent of Erasmus+ funding being spent by third countries. Just fewer than 34,000 people took part in higher education mobility, but we still do not have any data on that for Scotland. The Turing scheme differs in that it offers mobility worldwide, whereas 80 per cent of Erasmus+ awards had to be in Europe. Again, Scotland-specific data is unavailable. Why is the data unavailable? Who needs to process it so that we can get clarity? It seems that there is data from other parts of the process, but I am a bit unclear about why we do not have data. Perhaps Ms Jackson can answer the specific question, because it relates to your processes.

Lesley Jackson: The straightforward answer is that the UK Government holds the data, so we would look to the UK Government to disaggregate it. There is a general issue with a lack of transparency in the data on how Turing applications are assessed. There is a pattern with Turing of making partial awards, but we are not clear on what basis partial awards are determined. As you said, we do not have disaggregated data.

I have some information, because the higher education institutions in Scotland have done their own survey to try to establish, by talking to one another, what awards they have been getting. The data from that survey came in earlier this week. The information, which is from 12 of the 19 universities, suggests that there is no clear correlation between the amount of funding that has been requested and the amount that is awarded, unless the amount that was requested was under £100,000—those awards are being paid in full. There is huge variation across the institutions in how much they get. There is no clear correlation between the percentage of widening access students in an application and the percentage of funding that is awarded.

In the first year of Turing, halfway through it we also saw a shifting of the goalposts in relation to assessment of widening access participants. At the outset, I made a point about the stability and predictability of Erasmus+, which stands in sharp contrast to that approach.

As I said, we would like the Scottish Government to publish the assessment of the first year of SEEP, which we do not have. From the UK Government, we would like disaggregated data along the lines of the data that is provided in

Erasmus+, which is quite open when it comes to accessing data. That will allow us to understand how decisions are being made and it will give institutions the best shot at securing funding.

Scottish universities in particular were very good and successful at applying for Erasmus+ funding. They understood the system and how to develop projects that would be impactful and would secure funding. We are struggling to do that with Turing, because we just do not understand it. We put things in the sausage machine, then decisions come out the other end, but we do not understand what is happening in the middle. That is partly why we are seeing a drop-off in the percentage of awards coming to Scotland. Institutions are thinking, "We'll look at what we got this year. It was that amount, so let's go with that next year." Then they find that that has not worked, so they think, "Right, we'll try again next year."

That process is inefficient, and it does not benefit the UK Government, either. It would be to the UK Government's benefit if it was fully transparent about how the process works, because that would create a level playing field for everybody who applies.

Alexander Stewart: It appears that the process is disadvantaging institutions and that they are struggling to cope with the parameters that are being set. That must have a massive impact on the students who are trying to go through the processes. My question is for Sai. If the institutions cannot get clarification, it must be even harder for the students to process some of that and come through the minefield that is in front of them in order to progress.

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan: Yes—absolutely. I point out that, for the past seven weeks, the Turing website has been down, so you can come to a conclusion on how inaccessible that resource is, especially at a time when students require to access it.

As we have iterated, there is a significant gap in the data that students can access in order to analyse and decide what is better. That is to do with Turing and SEEP. As I mentioned, there has been a publication gap, in that the Scottish Government has not produced information on success rates from the first trial of SEEP. That is relatively minor, but it is indicative of how unequal the scheme is. We are reliant on the institutions for knowledge about Turing, rather than the Government that has produced the scheme.

Alexander Stewart: Roy, I suppose that universities and colleges will be the same, in that the timelines remain the biggest challenge in ensuring that they get the advantages of SEEP. How is that affecting your organisations?

Roy Gardner: Is that about the advantages from SEEP or Turing?

Alexander Stewart: It is about SEEP.

Roy Gardner: As I said, in the first year, the college sector was not necessarily engaged. Now it is engaged and, with certainty of funding, the college sector can embed its staff teams and get the curriculum ready. However, Sai makes a pertinent point about the fact that it is up to the institutions and the sector to make students aware of the funds that are available to them through the programmes and schemes.

Reversing from that, there is a timeline for putting that into communications with student associations and so on. However, there is a lack of certainty around funding. As Sai said, the website is down. The other reason for information from reports not being forthcoming is that responsibility for doing that has changed from one managing partner, which was Capita, to the Department for Education. That inevitably leads to a lag in output.

We have no college-sector data on Turing at this stage, because we are only really in year 3. My own institution was successful in year 1 but completely unsuccessful in year 2, for reasons that were unknown to us. We are now picking up, and we are in year 3. However, for year 4 and going forward, the funding cap, or the drop in funding, makes it look as though it will be unsustainable for the college sector to get involved.

Alexander Stewart: The law of diminishing returns means that you are not able to progress in some respects.

Roy Gardner: Yes.

Alexander Stewart: I want to ask about the proposed Scottish graduate visa scheme. It would be useful to hear all our witnesses' views on the idea of a tailored visa route for graduates from universities and colleges who want to stay in Scotland. Is there a willingness and a way forward for that? What might be the pros and cons of such a scheme? Could it unravel or could it progress? Would there be barriers to its succeeding? Perhaps Lesley Jackson could start and then we could go around the table.

Lesley Jackson: Sure—thank you. We very much welcome the proposal. The difficulty that we see is with regards to international students coming in and being able to access the graduate visa route, which you will know was subject to review by the previous UK Government. We very much welcome that the scheme was kept in place. However, the step from the graduate visa to the skilled worker visa is very high. We are talking about requiring someone, just two years after their graduation, to be able to earn £38,700, which in

many sectors is just not credible. There needs to be something that bridges that gap.

If we think about it, those are highly educated, enthusiastic, committed young people, coming in from all over the world, who want to stay and contribute to our country, and to Scotland in particular. We know what the demographic data looks like. We know that we need to have more people coming into Scotland, and that they need to be of working age and contributing, by paying their taxes, in order to deal with the forthcoming imbalance in the population. We would really welcome a mature conversation between the Scottish and UK Governments about what can be done in that space to allow those people who have come here, studied and got a job—who are doing well and now want to stay for longer—to have an opportunity to increase their earnings before they go into the other visa routes that the UK already offers.

Alexander Stewart: Sai, perhaps we could hear your views on that.

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan: Absolutely. This issue is really personal to me, because I am an international student myself.

The student body very much welcomes the proposal. We have seen a significant increase in overseas students coming from other parts of the world after Brexit. We should welcome that whole-heartedly. Keeping the cultural argument aside, the education sector has been stable because of the economic contributions that those students have made despite the hostility that, time and again, the previous Westminster Government imposed. There has not been any significant change since the new Government took office.

I go back to my point about us trying to foresee that students will be sector leaders and so providing them with education and equal opportunities for employment. At the end of the day, we need a diverse range of skills and people from differing cultural backgrounds. We need to be pioneering in our approach to cultural competence. That is how we will be sector leaders and exceed any expectations from benchmarks that have been put in place for the education sector.

Given the current employment rates, the proposed Scottish graduate visa scheme should be a very accessible route for many students coming in. As Lesley Jackson mentioned, there are different loopholes with regard to the thresholds at Westminster as well. We know that people have to earn around £37,000 or £38,000 a year to access the skilled worker visa. There is a sponsored option, but that is not easy to get because most organisations, including a lot of charities, do not offer that—even though the cost is minimal, a lot of bureaucracy comes with it. There is something to be said about that.

10:15

There are other loopholes within the visa system, such as the new entrants visa. That visa has a lower salary threshold, but it is for students on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics courses and for individuals with STEM backgrounds to access employment. It is not accessible to the general public or the general student body. Indeed, information on the visa is not very accessible. It is accessible only to people who take the time to go through a solicitor or who possibly do their own research.

When we are talking about making available more employment opportunities, especially in the charity sector, this massive change—it is revolutionary—could have a very positive impact on the Scottish economy and on the Scottish cultural landscape. It could boost the economy, given the ageing population. We need more inward migration to rectify that problem as well.

From a student perspective, the dream would be joining the Erasmus+ programme and introducing the Scottish graduate visa. In Scotland, that would allow us to shift our narrative away from that of the hostile environment that we have been living under. In addition, we know that Scotland has had an active role in historical inequities as well, and that is something that we need to say out loud. This is a real chance to step up and be a pioneer in equality and in offering equal opportunities. We should be proactive in taking our first steps on that.

We live in hope. We back the proposal—of course we back it. We would 100 per cent be willing to work with the Government on if it is to be introduced, because we have a lot of students with lived experiences, especially those who have officer positions in student associations, whose daily function is to help students through their education, and even to get by. This could be a big turning point that changes Scotland's landscape, including the education and the youth sectors.

Alexander Stewart: Roy, do you have anything that you want to add?

Roy Gardner: Yes, I do. That is a fantastic question. Universities and colleges are completely united on the issue.

If I take a step back from that, I note that the college sector would just like to have parity with the university sector at this stage. We have many international students coming through the college network across Scotland, but they can work only 10 hours a week, as opposed to the 20 hours a week that students can work who are studying, for

example, across the road from us at the University of Strathclyde or at any university. Getting that on an even keel would be good for us.

I fully support the Scottish graduate visa route. It would be a unique selling point, and it has been done before by previous Governments. It is about having those mature conversations, as Lesley Jackson said.

The college sector would fully welcome that. If you look at some of the local labour market surveys across Scotland, you will see that key sectors and industries are crying out for skilled labour in specialist areas such as financial services and engineering—where salaries can hit the skilled worker visa threshold—and colleges and universities can supply people to them.

My institution has a global reputation for maritime studies, which is a sector that offers very well-paid careers. I think that the sector needs 2,000 entrants a year, but currently the figure is just below 1,000. Having the proposed visa scheme as a USP to sell to the world would give Scotland a very competitive advantage. My institution has welcomed 50 international delegations over the past 15 years. Having that scheme as an offer would put Scotland firmly on the map when it comes to attracting international talent.

Alexander Stewart: Sarah Paterson, do you want to add anything, or are you content with what has been said?

Sarah Paterson: I think that I will leave that one to my further and higher education colleagues.

Alexander Stewart: Okay. Thank you, convener.

The Convener: We had a private briefing with officials before the session today. Although I cannot hold the Government to this, it indicated that it hoped to report on SEEP by the end of the summer. I hope that it is helpful for me to highlight that. However, a week is a long time in politics, so I will leave it there.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland) (Green): Good morning. I want to ask about how the loss of Erasmus+ has affected research and the overlaps in that regard. Projects such as horizon overlapped quite nicely with Erasmus+ and enabled the exchange of research, especially for honours, masters and PhD students. How is the loss of that affecting the research landscape in higher education? After the initial responses, I will ask Sai to speak about how that is affecting students' choices of projects and so on.

Lesley Jackson: Horizon and Erasmus+ are underpinned by networks—it is all about networks in this sector, especially in the research space. There are international collaborations and cross-institutional working, and people establish those opportunities and build those alliances through meeting each other and spending time with each other. Obviously, the sector strongly welcomed association to horizon Europe, albeit after three years, and we are working incredibly hard to maximise participation rates in horizon, because three years is a long time. That is a particular issue for early career researchers, as there are now people in the sector who had no experience of the previous horizon programme. Everyone has their eye on the value for money assessment that the Treasury will make of horizon in determining whether to pursue association to the 10th framework programme for research and innovation—FP10—which is the next programme. Horizon is worth €95 billion, and FP10 could be worth as much as €200 billion. Not being part of that programme would be catastrophic for the sector.

Erasmus+ provided funding for alliances such as Eureka and CIVIS Europe, which our institutions are in. Institutions are now having to decide whether to withdraw from those alliances or fund participation from their own somewhat empty pockets. Even where they are looking to participate, there are some restrictions on what they are able to do, because they are now third-country institutions. Some of those restrictions are only perceived as restrictions among the other partners, and we are working those through, but others are real. You are absolutely right to raise the issue, as it is an interconnected system.

Towards the end of last year, the Scottish Government put in place some funding to enable researcher mobility linked to an increase in horizon applications. I think that the Scottish Government put in £65,000 and the funding eventually came up to just over £100,000 after contributions from the Scottish Funding Council and the Scottish Universities Life Sciences Alliance. That programme was massively oversubscribed. We would be keen to see the Scottish Government put such funding in place again next year, because not only are we kind of racing to hit that perception of value for money, but we are starting from a low base and we do not have the access to Erasmus+ that would enable us to build up those partnerships in the way that we need to, so there is almost a perfect storm in that space. Anything that the UK and Scottish Governments can do to further facilitate that staff mobility is welcome.

The fact that staff mobility is part of SEEP is incredibly welcome, because that fills a gap that was left when the Turing scheme was established.

Gillian Mackay: Are there things on staff mobility that are missing from SEEP? Given that the Scottish Government is in this learning phase,

are there things that you would you like the Scottish Government to add in to SEEP to make those things easier?

Lesley Jackson: The issue is partly about volume of funding. SEEP is a small programme that costs £400,000 a year, and there is potential to think about ring fencing elements. The downside of that, of course, is that there would be additional levels of bureaucracy and technicality in what is a very small programme. The question for the Scottish Government is about how that amount of money can be most impactful.

On the extent to which the focus is on supporting mobility, I would say that supporting student mobility delivers a huge amount of social and lifelong benefits, as we have already discussed today, and supporting research mobility opens up access to those other funding streams, so I would not want to pit one against the other— both are important. However, the Scottish Government has to recognise that, if SEEP is not the mechanism for further encouraging researcher mobility, we need to think about what other mechanisms could be put in place—such as the funding that was introduced last year for the research that I mentioned, which, as I said, was oversubscribed—so that we are still able to make that full contribution and access this enormous programme, which, as I said, is probably only going to get bigger in the next funding framework.

Gillian Mackay: Thank you. Sai, can you tell us how the ecosystem that Lesley Jackson has set out and the loss of some of those overlaps feel to students who are trying to access projects or early-career research?

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan: I would echo exactly what Lesley Jackson has said, especially with regard to students in research positions and PhD students, who are students and staff at the same time. That lack of staff mobility really makes a difference.

The issue is not just the reduction in mobility, though, but the loss of research collaborations. If we really want to set the sort of standard that we have iterated before, we really need to up our game and promote more research collaborations around the globe, especially in the European network, to which we had access through programmes such as horizon. We have missed opportunities with regard to joint funding programmes, and that is a grave loss to students coming from different backgrounds. Indeed, it brings me back to the point that this disproportionately affects students from widening access or deprived backgrounds. The fact is that having joint funding bodies will not really work if we are out of the network, because this sort of thing will be done jointly by Governments.

The increase in administrative and financial barriers has demotivated a lot of students and researchers from taking up more opportunities. The risk is that there could be a brain drain, if I may call it that, which might lead to our research networks and our numbers plummeting and to our not being able to present as much of the world-class research that we are carrying out right now.

Historically speaking, we have had a number of researchers—their names are very familiar. We have had James Clerk Maxwell and John Macleod, for example, as well as a lot of other researchers, especially from our ancient universities. There is an element of multidisciplinary research that, historically, we have been very good at, but we will lose that sort of opportunity if we do not have access to the networks any more.

Gillian Mackay: That was great. Thank you. Roy, are there similar collaborative things that have become more difficult for your sector with the loss of that interconnectivity and collaboration?

Roy Gardner: Yes, but from an institutional partnership perspective, not from a research perspective. Some of our anecdotal evidence, which comes from City of Glasgow College's work with Denmark and other EU countries, suggests that the managing agencies in-country have stopped working with the UK. Indeed, we have recently heard that from the next round of Erasmus+—from 2027-28 onwards—no UK partnerships can take place.

We have maintained partnerships in a couple of areas since 2020, and the legacy of the strategic partnerships has helped in that respect. Whether they be in building learning or online platforms, we have managed to build on those partnerships, and that is a positive legacy. More often than not, though, managing agencies in-country are simply closing the door on you as an institution and the country that you are trying to serve.

Gillian Mackay: Sarah, what do we need from the current schemes in order to make things better overall for youth work? Is it about making it easier to apply for things or overcoming some of the anecdotal barriers that I am sure you have been hearing about from various organisations, to ensure that we can have vibrant collaboration across youth work organisations, too?

Sarah Paterson: If it is okay, I want first of all to pick up your previous question on staff mobility and the loss of those networks and partnerships. It is mentioned in the evidence that we submitted before today's meeting, and I draw your attention again to the digital youth work partnership across the EU that we were involved in. We did not know at the time that it would allow us to train more than 1,000 youth workers in a very short space of time

when the pandemic hit. We also now have digitalyouthwork.scot, and the partnerships and collaborations from that have benefited tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of young people in Scotland and across the EU.

10:30

The fact that there is no partnership aspect to either Turing or SEEP means that our professional youth workers—and volunteers; we have not talked about the massive loss of the volunteering strand from Erasmus+—have lost the ability to share great practice.

We are trying to keep those partnerships going. The UK is still part of the Council of Europe, and we are trying to keep the partnerships, including the international youth policy dialogue network, together through that—I will stop there on that point. We are doing our very best, and so are some of our members, including the World YMCA—which is an international organisation—Scouts Scotland and Girlguiding UK. The fact that we have lost access to Erasmus+ is a huge challenge.

On the two programmes that we have at the moment—Turing and SEEP—for us, there is a better way in through the Scottish educational exchange programme, but in both programmes there needs to be a dedicated youth strand. Although it is always great to have partnerships with higher and further education, sometimes those will work and sometimes they will not be a good fit for the young people the sector is working for.

Particularly for the Scottish educational exchange programme, we are looking for a youth work strand, funding for inward mobility, funding to enable youth work staff and volunteers to take part in training and development, and support for strategic partnerships. We are looking for some form of ring-fenced youth work strand. Given that no youth work organisations have been involved yet in the Scottish educational exchange programme, if that strand were not possible, we would want something similar to what the Government did for the colleges sector, which would bring everybody in the youth work sector together with financed support from Government so that they could access the partnerships that have been put in place.

Ultimately, we would like to see both Turing and SEEP extended and access widened. I understand that, from the Scottish Government's point of view, the first couple of years will involve testing and learning, but I hope that we can build on them, to involve some of the "plus" of Erasmus+ and to extend them and widen access.

From an equality and inclusion point of view, that is what we need to do.

Gillian Mackay: Absolutely. Does anyone else want to add anything about what they want to see for their own sector, particularly in relation to SEEP?

Roy Gardner: We want consistency of message and multiyear funding. As Sarah Patterson rightly mentioned, we are testing and learning on the way, and we are taking those learnings and putting them into practice. In the colleges sector, we would very much welcome a firm commitment to multiyear funding.

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan: I echo everything that Roy just said. Alongside that, we want more student support, a more consistent funding model and more investment in student support, especially for students from deprived backgrounds.

From a procedural point of view, we would like the publication gap to be filled so that we know the success rates for our sector. Students would then have more accessible information on how the scheme works and functions and on the opportunities that they could access. We should break down the procedural barriers, the financial barriers and the bureaucratic barriers that are linked to immigration. I know that a lot has happened after Brexit, but if even half the barriers could be removed, a lot of students would be able to access the scheme. That would be very welcome.

Gillian Mackay: Thank you.

The Convener: I have a final question. As well as the numbers, the costs and the demographics, I am still worried about the intangible links, so I thank Gillian Mackay for opening up that subject. When I was convener of the Education and Skills Committee in the previous parliamentary session, one of the worries was that, given that research funding can be more about the individuals involved than about where the institutions are, a number of EU members of staff would move their research back to Europe as a result of the situation with the horizon programme. The three-year gap and the hostile environment were worries at the time. People were saying, "Why should I stay somewhere I am not welcome?" That was the feeling of a lot of the researchers I spoke to at that time. Did that happen? Was there a loss of staff back to Europe during those three years? What impact has there been on colleges and higher education?

Lesley Jackson: The number of academic staff who are EU nationals has held up pretty well, although the percentage of academic staff overall who are EU nationals has fallen slightly.

There was uncertainty. We are out of the Erasmus programme and the UK Government has no appetite for going back in, but there was always that potential with the horizon scheme. We eventually realised that the association agreement would get over the line, but there was perhaps recognition that, for a period, the process was being held up because it was being buffeted by political storms elsewhere.

We need to be clear that the research strengths of our universities in Scotland—which are astonishing relative to our population—attract students as well as staff. When international students choose an institution, they look at our reputation. We should be really proud that excellent international research is being undertaken in every university in Scotland, but we have to maintain that in order to maintain that ecosystem. I remind the committee that Scotland-domiciled students are cross-subsidised by international student fees, so the issue matters as much to the education of Scots as it does to the education of international students and those from elsewhere in the UK.

In relation to the longer term, it is now harder for researchers, especially younger researchers. Our submission included some demographic material about younger researchers. The national health service surcharge and visa fees have to be paid, and the costs of living in this country are relatively high. There is also the uncertainty about FP10. We absolutely cannot have another three years of waiting. We need to be in with FP10 from the get-go, which will help us to attract talent.

In a fortnight, Universities Scotland will, for the first time in more than a decade, take a delegation, led by Professor Sir Peter Mathieson from the University of Edinburgh, to Brussels to meet European partners, including senior representatives from the European Commission. We will make the point about the contribution that Scottish institutions make to realising European, global and UK priorities, and we will say that we want to continue to work with the EU. However, we need strong messaging from the UK that it wants to continue to be part of the European networks and research collaborations that Sai talked about in order to continue to attract the international talent on which our reputations are based.

Roy Gardner: I do not have the figure for the drop in the number of EU staff in the college sector, but there has been a 40 per cent drop in enrolments by EU students in the period from 2018 to now, which is significant.

I will pick up on the point that Sai made about the enrichment of the environment for students in Scotland. We have, in Europe, the benefit of having one of the most diverse areas in the world on our doorstep, and we had Erasmus to access that. The unintended consequence of not being involved in the scheme is that Scotland-domiciled students are being left behind when it comes to social mobility. That is a real challenge, and we want to address it before it is far too late. Turing and SEEP are not like-for-like replacements. I would keep those schemes and reintroduce Erasmus if possible, because it helps with the enrichment of the Scottish student environment.

Sai Shraddha S Viswanathan: I very much agree with what Lesley Jackson and Roy Gardner have said. On migration and international students coming in, it is a lesser-known fact that there are a lot of international students in colleges. We know about the nautical school in Glasgow, but many students from international backgrounds come for language exchanges and other courses. We need those demographics.

As an international student, I have lived experience of going through the application process and choosing a Scottish university for my study—I studied for a course in psychology at the University of Aberdeen. The first thing that international students notice are the QS and *Times Higher Education* rankings—we notice league table rankings. Postgraduate students like me think, "Is this university or institution a Russell group university?" Then we look at the ranking of the course in the UK and the world, which is a very significant number. With regard to the international community, in this digital age, there are many forums, so institutions have to be on a par when it comes to not only league tables but word of mouth among students.

The same goes for colleges. There are many courses in colleges that attract international students to come for an education, but we have seen a significant drop in numbers coming from Europe, especially after Brexit, in the timelines that were mentioned. There has also been a significant drop in the number of students, especially from Europe, who can access different forums and participate in conferences in the research sector in the UK. We know that that has always been difficult with regard to overseas countries, but losing out on the first step, which is Europe, is very detrimental to our economy and our reputation.

As Roy Gardner said, SEEP is a good step in the right direction, but if we could also reintroduce Erasmus and rejoin the research networks and other networks where we had a place, we would really appreciate that. As a student body, we are part of the European Students Union, and we have heard time and again from our counterparts about the difficulty in accessing opportunities over here, especially in Scotland. With research and postgraduate courses in the higher education sector, it is essential that we have access to

mobility, for field trips and experience trips and to get more hands-on experiences and attend conferences. The same goes for vocational courses and apprentices.

A mobility scheme or the option of movement is really important, especially when it comes to our reputation and setting a benchmark for how we want to be perceived in the education sector, not only in the UK but in the world. We are competing against a lot of universities and colleges in different parts of the world. If we want to stand apart, because we have a significant number of students, we really need to take a step in the right direction by getting into Erasmus again or rejoining those networks.

The Convener: That is really helpful. Thank you.

Before we come to a close, is there anything that our witnesses want to add that has not been covered?

Roy Gardner: I think that everything has been covered.

The Convener: That is good. Well done, committee members, for getting everything covered. The session has been very helpful, and I thank all our witnesses.

Meeting closed at 10:45.

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