OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 5 March 2025

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 5 March 2025

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)
*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jacqui Brasted (Scottish Funding Council)
Fiona Burns (Scottish Funding Council)
Graeme Dey (Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans)
Clara Pirie (Scottish Government)
Daniel Proudfoot (Scottish Funding Council)
Erica Russell-Hensens (Scottish Funding Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 5 March 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Widening Access to Higher Education

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning and welcome to the eighth meeting in 2025 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. We have apologies from Bill Kidd and Willie Rennie.

The first item on our agenda is evidence on the widening access inquiry, for which we have two panels of witnesses. First, I welcome from the Scottish Funding Council. Jacqui Brasted is interim director of access, learning and outcomes; Erica Russell-Hensens is deputy director; Fiona Burns is assistant director of student interests, access and quality; and Daniel Proudfoot is a senior data analyst. Thank you all for joining us today and for the written evidence that you have submitted. I invite Jacqui Brasted to make an opening statement.

Jacqui Brasted (Scottish Funding Council): Good morning. We welcome this inquiry and the opportunity to give evidence. The aim of the commission on widening access to achieve fair access to university impacts every level of Scottish society. Education can have a transformational impact on people's lives because it enables social mobility and can break cycles of deprivation. It is also in Scotland's national interests: when people meet their full potential, whatever their background, they are empowered to play their role in society and the economy.

Widening access to university needs a whole-system approach. There has been a huge amount of progress on widening access, as was demonstrated by the 2021 interim COWA target being achieved ahead of time. There is much to celebrate beyond the target, due to the hard work and commitment of partners across the education system and beyond. Beyond that target, for example, attainment levels for Scottish index of multiple deprivation decile 20 students have improved, with particular growth in the number of those students achieving a first-class degree.

COWA is an important part of our approach to widening access at the SFC. We deliver on those fair access commitments through our data and reporting, our approach to outcomes, assurance, funding and quality in the college and university sector and through the investments that we make, for example, in our national schools programme and the Scottish wider access programme.

We are also committed to access and equalities beyond the remit of COWA. We have a sector-leading partnership with the Equality and Human Rights Commission and we were the first public body in the United Kingdom to develop a memorandum of understanding with the EHRC, which sets out our joint working. Through that collaboration, we have set out our national equality outcomes for colleges and universities, which focus on protected characteristics and aim to tackle the most persistent inequalities in our tertiary system.

All that work has been delivered in partnership with the college and university sectors, third sector partners and, importantly, those with lived experience. The SFC has long held a commitment to fair access and equalities and we will continue that vital work in partnership with the Scottish Government, the institutions that we fund, third sector partners and learners and students.

The Convener: How is progress towards the targets going? Are you satisfied? Do you think that that needs greater emphasis? Is there enough support from Government and other bodies?

Jacqui Brasted: There has been good progress to date. We have met the interim target. We had fallen behind a little, but it looks like we are back on track. I will pass over to my colleague Fiona Burns to say a bit more about that.

Fiona Burns (Scottish Funding Council): Incredible progress has been made on the commitment on widening access target since it was first introduced in "A Blueprint for Fairness". It was always an ambitious target. We met the first milestone a year ahead of time, but it is difficult and challenging, and quite rightly so.

It is impressive how well institutions have responded, particularly through their admissions criteria. They all have contextualised admissions—with the exception of the Open University, which does not require them, as it has an open admission process—to enable access, so that some students do not have to compete in the same way as other students do. That has made a tremendous difference in moving towards the target.

Recently, progress has stalled slightly, and you will know that levels went down slightly in the past year, but we are confident that they will increase. The signs are good. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service applications and acceptances look like they are going in the right direction. We have an early-access return as well, which gives us an early indication of where we might be and

indicates that we might see an upturn in the next couple of years. That is what we would want to move towards that 18 per cent milestone by 2026.

The Convener: Is reaching that milestone of 18 per cent by 2026 achievable?

Erica Russell-Hensens (Scottish Funding Council): Yes, we believe that it is. There are qualifications to that assertion because we cannot be certain. As Fiona Burns mentioned, the early-access returns give us a good indication that the direction of travel is the right one, but they do not give us certainty at this point. Universities and colleges are all very committed to making progress in that respect and we will support them to do that.

The Convener: Ms Burns, you spoke about the number stalling and then going backwards a little. Should that be a concern, or did you always anticipate that that would happen, because when you are meeting long-term targets, there will be peaks and troughs?

Fiona Burns: You are absolutely right that there will be peaks and troughs, but the pandemic also happened during that time and, to the credit of universities, they did not take their eye off the ball and an awful lot happened. There is genuine commitment by both sectors to fair access in the system. They work very well together; it is really important in a tertiary system that colleges and universities, as well as the school system, work together towards that commitment.

The Convener: We heard last week from the commissioner for fair access, from other witnesses and from some of the written submissions about the unique number identifier and how important that could be going forward. Do you support that? Do you have any concerns about it? Is there a reason why it was not introduced previously? We heard some concerns about the costs associated with it. Would you like to respond, Ms Russell-Hensens?

Erica Russell-Hensens: Yes, I would be happy to take that question. The Funding Council strongly supports the exploration of using a unique learner number, or ULN, as some call it. There are a number of reasons why we hope that a ULN will be implemented. First, we think that it will help us to understand better both the long-term benefits of the investments that we are making and the progress that learners and students are making through the education system and, importantly, through the whole system. We also think that it would help to support more accurate reporting of student journeys, particularly with regard to different demographics and journeys through education, bearing in mind protected characteristics. It would be much simpler to understand that journey if we had a unique learner number.

The other benefit is that it could help us to successfully identify pathways that we cannot see in the data now. If we know that those pathways are successful in supporting people, that could enable us to direct investment towards then, and it might help colleges and universities to expand the provision of them.

For many of those reasons, we also highlighted the unique learner number as being beneficial in our recent review of the national schools programme. We believe that it would enable us to better analyse the impact of the national schools programme and of all the activities that take place within that, and, therefore, to better direct our investment within that.

We also recognise that there are some examples that might be used as exemplars. For example, we could replicate the model of the national health service number. It is recognised that implementing the unique learner number would not be an insignificant project or piece of work and that it would require investment. It is for the Government to determine whether legislation is required, but if that were the case, we would support the introduction of such legislation.

The Convener: Why would legislation need to be introduced? The commissioner for fair access did not know for sure but did not think that legislation would be required. Other witnesses thought that it might be required, possibly for the free school meals tracking pilot in Aberdeen to be rolled out further. Do you know why legislation would be required for the unique learner number, or do you think that there is still a question as to whether it is needed?

Erica Russell-Hensens: It is my understanding that whether legislation is required is still a question that is to be determined, but, again, it would be for the Government to determine that. There are significant complexities, not least in the data-sharing element. I am sure that you would want to ensure that appropriate protections are in place in respect of individuals' data and its management. It would be for the Government to determine whether legislation is required, but if it is, we would be supportive of that legislation.

The Convener: Mr Proudfoot, you are a senior data analyst. Has your work been hampered by not having that unique learner number or identifier up to now? How could your work benefit from that in the future?

Daniel Proudfoot (Scottish Funding Council): As Erica Russell-Hensens said, it would be hugely beneficial for identifying learner journeys and pathways, but it would also have secondary benefits. It would aid us greatly in tracking

articulation from college to university. The SFC creates the national articulation database—that is used in our report on widening access, along with other means—but we do not have a reliable, unique learner number to enable us to track students. All the tracking is done on first name, surname and date of birth, using something called fuzzy matching. That is good, but it is not perfect. A unique identifier would have significant secondary benefits. It will have significant benefits in things such as tracking retention in the university sector—as students move past first year into second and third year and throughout their degree—because it would greatly speed up the retention analysis process and make that more accurate.

The Convener: Why are we sat here in 2025 still discussing this? The committee's inquiry is quite short, and every witness so far has spoken about the benefits of a unique identifier. The commissioner for fair access said that progress had been made—he felt that it was one of his recommendations that was really gaining momentum. However, why has it taken until this point? I have not heard anything yet, apart from cost alone, to suggest that a unique identifier could not have been implemented quite some time ago. Are we missing anything?

Jacqui Brasted: I do not think that you are missing anything, but I think that that is a question for Government, because it is in Government's gift to do that, if that is where it wishes to put its priorities and resources.

The Convener: Is there any estimate of the cost? We know roughly how many students there currently are, and the cost would obviously be on-going. Have no analysis or projections been done as to the cost of introducing a unique identifier?

Jacqui Brasted: I am not aware of any. We have not looked at that—it would be outside our remit. I am not aware of anything, but that does not mean—

The Convener: Nothing has been shared with you on cost.

Again, we could speak about the subject very positively for more weeks, months and years, but unless we know what the cost is going to be and if that is going to be met, the positive things that we hear about a potential roll-out will never come to fruition.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning and thank you for the information that you have shared with us so far. First, I will ask some more questions in the space that we have been just been discussing.

We have heard from a lot of witnesses that free school meals data, for example, would be a useful measure of individual fair access and that there is legislation in place across other parts of the United Kingdom, such as England and Wales, where data can be shared with UCAS to allow that. We also heard that it would be difficult to scale up the current pilot in the north-east.

On that basis—although I do not want to step on other members' toes—could you tell us a bit about what you are doing to improve data analysis around fair access?

Fiona Burns: I can come in initially, and then my colleague Daniel Proudfoot will probably be able to provide some more detail. With regard to the measures that we consider, we do not stick to the COWA target—it is hugely important, but it is not, by any means, the only measure that we use. In our outcome framework and assurance model, we consider care experience and a raft of other measures, including those that are linked to our national schools programmes, to get a good wide look at what fair access really means in both sectors.

Where the data is not as good as we need it to be, we have put a focus on that. One example is care experience. When we first started trying to identify the numbers that were in the system, how well they were doing and where they were, a significant piece of work was undertaken to improve that, and it is now a really good data set, because we have turned people's attention to it. That is just one example—there are many things that we do to continually improve our data.

Daniel, do you want to add anything?

Daniel Proudfoot: Yes—I have a small point to add. A lot of our university data comes from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, which collects data on behalf of higher education providers in England and Wales, and for universities in Scotland. The agency's data collection architecture has recently undergone significant rebuilding, which means that we get more accurate data for things such as disabilities. It allows universities to report students with any different combination of disabilities, rather than them falling under the category of "two or more disabilities". There are improvements, therefore, in the data that we receive from HESA.

Towards the end of 2023, we undertook a review of our statistical publications, which has made them much more streamlined and accessible on the website. They are no longer published as PDFs that have to be downloaded; they are all integrated in an interactive HTML format. We hope that the data is clearer and more accessible to a wider audience.

09:15

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It is fairly widely accepted that getting into university is only part of the story, and that staying in and coming out as a graduate are also key measures. The commissioner for fair access suggested that we should give equal weight to entry, student experience and outcomes. What data are you gathering to help us to understand those aspects of the widening access agenda?

Erica Russell-Hensens: We already monitor what we call retention, which is the transition of students in higher education from first year to second year. We also look at outcomes and where students go on successful completion of their degrees. There are a number of mechanisms that we use to do that. We also highlight those issues in the reports on widening access.

We have data and information that we use to investigate those tracks. However, to link back to what I said earlier about the unique learner number, and as Daniel Proudfoot said, much of the journey matching is done through statistical modelling, which creates a difficulty because of the processing and the time that it takes to do that. Further, it does not give a complete and perfect picture, which creates challenges.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: On measuring retention at first year and into second year, we heard evidence from young people that, if there is a drop-off at that point, that could sometimes be because people have realised that university may not be where they want to be, so looking at retention into third and fourth year might give a stronger picture of what is happening in institutions that is either helping people to stay or not. Are you considering looking at that?

Erica Russell-Hensens: We would expect all institutions to look at their retention data throughout the student journey. From my experience of working in higher education, I know that that is a crucial element of the work that institutions do. We are aware that retention rates have dropped across all SIMD categories in recent times. As you say, that could be for a myriad of reasons. It could be because of positive decisions by students—perhaps an employment opportunity has come up and they have chosen to take that path instead. It could also be linked to the cost of living or some of the tail impacts of the pandemic.

At this point, it would be hard for us to pinpoint the exact reasons, but understanding the journey of students from stage to stage is incredibly important. It is crucial to work with universities on that, as they are often best placed to understand their learner and student journeys.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Would it be possible to look at that aspect? You say that you do not know whether people are leaving because of a positive reason, such as taking employment, or to go elsewhere. How big a task would it be to start gathering that information?

Erica Russell-Hensens: We gather some information on that, and Daniel Proudfoot might be able to speak a little more about the detail of that. We can see student journeys in a holistic sense, because we have the intake figures, the retention figures and the outcome figures. In that sense, we can get a broad understanding of the student journey in Scotland and for each institution. However, it is always worth considering what more we can do and how we can change and improve what we are doing; we do that on a regular basis. Understanding the student journey is absolutely crucial.

Fiona Burns might want to add to that.

Fiona Burns: Our outcomes framework and assurance model refer to retention, and we look at that in some depth. When we see a dip in retention at an institution, we have a team in the organisation that speaks with the institution about why retention has gone down and what it is doing about it. At that point, the team would get an in-depth understanding from the institution as to why the changes have happened.

We kept a clear focus on retention, specifically for SIMD20 as well as other groups, as the “A Blueprint for Fairness” and the COWA targets were being progressed, to ensure that no harm, if you like, was being done through all of that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Related to that is the issue of student experience. We have heard evidence that the holistic approach to fair access needs to be progressed, but that it will require work on the existing credit-based funding model. Of course, that model focuses on input rather than output, which in turn drives a particular focus on, say, full-time learning, and we know that the demographics are shifting away from that. What is the Funding Council doing to address some of that and to offer a more agile and flexible approach to institutions through its funding model?

Jacqui Brasted: We have made a number of changes to the funding model in recent times. There are separate funding models for universities and colleges. Recently, a number of changes have been made to the model for colleges that they have welcomed. For example, we have given them more flexibility by aligning the cut-off dates for counting students for funding with those for the universities, which has brought more parity and has enabled more funding to stay within the college system.

We have also adjusted the number of credits that colleges need to deliver in order to meet their thresholds. We moved the threshold in response

to reports from colleges that they were finding it challenging to meet the targets; we adjusted it down but left the money within the system, which means that there is an increase per credit in the investment in each student. That has been helpful, too.

There are further changes that we are discussing with the colleges at the moment. Indeed, we are having quite intensive on-going conversations with them on the funding allocations for 2025-2026. The proposals will go to our board later this month and the indicative funding allocations will be published at the end of March, with the final allocations published at the end of May, as per the usual timetables. From that point of view, those conversations have been well received by the college principals; they seem to be quite happy, and they have asked for the changes that we have previously introduced to be allowed time to bed in.

There have been fewer changes to the university funding model in recent times. Among the main changes has been the removal of places that were added during the pandemic in response to the Scottish Qualifications Authority inflation in grades. Additional places and funding were put in to allow students to go to university; as those students have rolled through and completed their studies, we are moving those places out again. Again, though, the Government has made it clear that, as those places are moved out, the funding will be kept in, and there should be an increase in the amount of investment per student.

All of that supports widening access. We have specific funding for colleges and universities that supports widening access. Universities, for example, have the widening access and retention fund—WARF—which is about £15.6 million. Roughly half of that fund goes to two institutions—the University of the West of Scotland and Glasgow Caledonian University—that, as we have heard in previous evidence, do a huge amount of work on widening access. We also invest in specific programmes, which we can talk more about later; indeed, I suspect that that issue will come up.

As for colleges, we put about £51 million into access and inclusion funding to support retention and access, and that amount of funding has been retained. Therefore, despite our reducing thresholds and removing places—for very good reasons—that funding has remained stable, and we are continuing to invest in widening access to support students from those backgrounds to be able to go to university and college and succeed.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Pam Duncan-Glancy has covered quite a lot of what I was going to ask about.

In the SFC written submission, you say that you "target investment"; indeed, you have touched on some of that already. You have also mentioned the two universities that I was going to mention—Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of the West of Scotland. The fact is that some universities—in the north-east, for example—do not have so many SIMD20 areas to take into account, and we have heard evidence that the heavy lifting is being done by other universities, especially those around Glasgow. Do you think that the balance is correct? You said that there is extra funding, but the core funding is still the same for each place, wherever the university is, is it not?

Jacqui Brasted: That is broadly the case, although there are some differences, depending on the subject. Some subjects are more costly to teach than others, and the funding reflects that. There is some complexity in the funding models.

I will invite Fiona Burns to say a bit more about the impact of SIMD20 in a moment. As the committee has heard from other witnesses, SIMD20 is quite a broad-brush measure. There can be students from deprived backgrounds in high SIMD20 areas, just as there can be students in low SIMD20 areas who are not necessarily from those backgrounds. That is particularly problematic in rural areas.

John Mason: At the moment, the target is based on SIMD20.

Jacqui Brasted: It is.

John Mason: We have had a discussion about other measures, and my colleagues might want to go into that space. I assume that you are working on SIMD20 at the moment, but are you looking more widely?

Jacqui Brasted: We look at the wider context, because SIMD20 only gets us so far. It has been a really useful tool to drive the improvements that we have seen, but we need to recognise that there are other areas that can provide context about what is being delivered for widening access students.

Fiona Burns: We are very supportive of SIMD20, which is a valuable and helpful measure at the national level. I am sure that the committee will have covered, in previous discussions, the limitations of the rurality element of SIMD20 at the institutional level. That said, during the time that we have pursued the target, we have had the benefit of working with institutions in rural areas. It is quite incredible what they have done, despite the challenges of the measure. They have offered free accommodation and have done everything

that they can to make their institutions attractive to SIMD20 students who might not be in their area. They have been incredibly successful.

John Mason: Are you picking up that colleges and universities are struggling to do that because of financial pressures? We have had evidence that they would like to do more of that kind of thing, but that they just do not have the finances, partly because the fees have not gone up over the years.

Fiona Burns: I totally appreciate and am sympathetic to the financial positions of institutions. However, I can only say that, within the envelope of funding that they have or have had, we have been impressed by their efforts to deliver fair access. If we had a wider measure that we could use, such as free school meals or the unique learner number, we would be able to tell you that story in a lot more depth, which is why we are so supportive of those two measures. I could not go into the details of institutions' finances.

John Mason: When it comes to targeting, do you take into account whether a university has deeper pockets, or are you purely following the student so that, if the student needs £X in support, it does not matter which university they go to? Glasgow and Edinburgh are very wealthy universities, but Glasgow Caledonian and others are not. Is that a factor when you fund?

Jacqui Brasted: That is not a factor when we fund, because we need a fair and equitable funding system. Although it might appear on paper that some institutions are much wealthier than others, it is often the case that that wealth is tied up in reserves and buildings. It is not necessarily cash that they hold, so it is not simply the case that they could access those funds easily to reduce their reliance on public funding. From that point of view, we do not take that factor into consideration when distributing funding.

Institutions are responsible for ensuring that they are financially sustainable. That is part of our conditions of grants and our outcomes framework and assurance model. It is for institutions' senior teams—for colleges and their boards of management, and for universities and their courts—to make decisions, as autonomous institutions, that enable them to ensure that they are sustainable. We appreciate that some of their decisions at the moment are proving to be quite challenging, but they are trying to continue to deliver the best that they can for their students, their local communities and Scotland.

John Mason: Colleagues might want to return to that.

I want to raise one other area, which is completely different. If you cannot answer this, do not. On Monday evening, we met some young people from different backgrounds who shared their experiences, off the record. One issue that we picked up from some of the ethnic minority young people was that they were not aware of all the different options. They found the whole space to be quite complicated. They knew that if they got lots of highers, they could go from school straight to university, but some did not know that they could go to college first and then to university, or they did not know about the graduate apprenticeship programme. Does the SFC have any involvement in that, or is that not in your neck of the woods?

09:30

Erica Russell-Hensens: We do to a degree. It has long been recognised that it is a very confusing landscape for many people, not just for young people and school leavers. We support a number of programmes that support transition. For example, the national schools programme that we fund delivers to around 50,000 young people in schools. The premise of the national schools programme is to support access to university. A big part of what such programmes deliver is exactly what you are describing—advice and guidance for young people to understand a complicated landscape.

Another example is the Scottish Wider Access Programme—you might have heard of it by its acronym, SWAP—which focuses on adult returners, being those who did not previously have the qualifications that they might need. A big part of what SWAP does is to provide advice and guidance to adult returners to understand the landscape.

Another element of work that we support is the Scottish credit and qualifications framework—the SCQF. I am sorry that there are so many acronyms, but it is often referred to as that. The premise of that qualifications framework is to map qualifications in Scotland and to help employers, young people and teachers to understand how all the different qualifications link to one other and progress and roll in to one other.

We provide support in a number of ways, but the problem, as you describe it, still exists and it is a complicated process and mechanism. However, colleges and universities do a huge amount of work to try to explain it, as do schools.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, witnesses, and thanks for joining us. We have had a lot of data-heavy questions so far, but I have another one in relation to fair access and what is currently measured that is not measured as part of the commissioner's targets. What consideration have you given to getting a better understanding of fair access for other groups, such as disabled

students and black and minority ethnic students, and to the recording of that data?

Fiona Burns: We do record that data. We break it down by racial group, and we consider the outcomes in some depth. We look at intake, retention, degree outcome and successful completions in the college sector.

We have done a significant piece of work with our partners in the Equality and Human Rights Commission to look in depth at persistent inequalities. That work involved setting equality outcomes that we ask all institutions to contribute to, including a set of outcomes on race and specific elements related to that. That piece of work was very data heavy, but it was also very heavy on lived experiences, which are reflected in the equality outcomes for that protected characteristic in our national equality outcomes.

Erica Russell-Hensens: The national equality outcomes cover a range of protected characteristics. That enables us to work with colleges and universities to explore where they are targeting progress, and perhaps where progress is not being made and where further work might be needed. As Fiona Burns says, we look at the data for all the protected characteristics and learn what we can.

Miles Briggs: Have you looked at that through the prism of tackling poverty and the barriers that students might face, and what the data might be presenting to you?

Fiona Burns: Yes. Because of the COWA target and because it is hugely important, we split that data into all protected characteristics. We will endeavour to keep doing that and, if we identify particular issues, we will look to address them. It is a valid and important point.

Miles Briggs: Going back to John Mason's point, some of the young people whom we spoke to on Monday evening referred to the UCAS application form. Although they do not tick boxes on that form, could there be boxes to enable them to do so, to perhaps passport them to a system in which they need not constantly repeat their stories? They felt that stigmatisation was almost built into the system. Do you have any thoughts on that? How could the issue be addressed at the very starting point, when people are applying for a course?

Fiona Burns: Thank you for that helpful feedback. It is only by receiving such feedback that we can seek to improve and to drive forward change.

Could you repeat the final part of your question?

Miles Briggs: It was about the UCAS application form. There is a "care experienced" box for people to tick, but there are other characteristics that could be identified at the very starting point—

Fiona Burns: I am sorry—I lost my train of thought.

Miles Briggs: No worries. If that was done at the start, people could be passported through their whole study period without constantly having to apply for various things.

Fiona Burns: There are some wonderful initiatives in the sector, one of which is at West Lothian College, although I appreciate that that is not particularly linked to UCAS. It is taking more of a trauma-informed and trauma-aware approach for exactly that reason. Wherever we can find a system that avoids people having to tell their story repeatedly to numerous parts of the system, we absolutely must adopt it.

It is earlier days on that, but we can definitely seek to make improvements. There are already some really good examples in the system. I do not want to keep harping on about the unique learner number, but that is one reason why it is so important. If that was in place and we could develop it to such an extent that it provided information that the student was willing to share, that would prevent what you described from happening, whereby people are put off whatever educational endeavour they are looking to undertake.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful. Thank you.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Sticking with the same theme, I am interested in how the data intersects. As things stand, students from an SIMD20 background who are disabled are doubly marginalised in the system. How do you handle that data without duplicating it in separate silos, whereby we have one report on the access rate of disabled students and another on the access rate of students from an SIMD20 background? How do you make sure that an intersectional approach is taken, such that a broader overview can be taken of how the various marginalisation factors overlap with one another and what the impact is?

Fiona Burns: That is a very valid point, which is why it is so important that, at the same time that "A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access" came out and the COWA target was put in place, we entered our strategic relationship with the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Fair access tends to be more about SIMD20 and poverty, but you cannot look at fair access without considering protected characteristics.

From our perspective, the two processes—the outcomes framework and assurance model, which is where our measures sit, and the work that we have done on persistent inequalities with the

Equality and Human Rights Commission—sit together for that very reason: to ensure that they are both considered.

We expect our institutions to take an intersectional approach in all their work. We certainly do. When we look at the data, we split it and we look at it by different characteristics to pinpoint where there might be specific issues that should be brought to the attention of others.

Ross Greer: I have a specific follow-up question about Corseford College, which I have just contacted the SFC about—that email may or may not have made it to any of you, as I sent it only about 48 hours ago.

Corseford College is a unique institution. At the moment, it is funded not by the SFC but through an arrangement involving a variety of Scottish Government funding pots that have been cobbled together over the years. For that reason, there has been a lack of certainty around the college's funding.

Corseford provides a unique offering for students who have very complex additional needs, for whom the regular college experience will not be possible. Have you had any discussions, either with the college or with any of the existing institutions that you fund, about how we can increase access for students who have very particular and complex needs?

Fiona Burns: Corseford College is a wonderful thing for us to have—I am so glad that it is there. It is not one of our fundable bodies, but it does incredible work. I know that that point came up during the parliamentary reception that was held by Lead Scotland and hosted by Ms Duncan-Glancy. It is hugely important and I am glad that it has come up today.

In relation to what we do with colleges, our colleges provide what is called price group 5, which is a very strange term for a bespoke provision for small groups of students. Many of those students will be supported through that provision, which is funded at a higher rate. That is what we can do.

Not all colleges will be able to support some of the learners whom you are referring to, so it is important that there is that wider landscape in Scotland. I am fully supportive of Corseford College; it is a good asset to have.

Ross Greer: I assume that this would require ministerial direction, but have there been any discussions between the SFC and Corseford College about whether it could become a funded institution?

Fiona Burns: We were involved at the beginning. I will hand over to Jacqui on that point.

Jacqui Brasted: There have not been discussions about whether it can become fundable, but we understand that the Scottish Government is planning on funding it directly. How it takes that forward is a question for the Scottish Government.

Ross Greer: Conveniently, the Scottish Government is in next, so we can ask it that question.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): As you are aware, part-time students are not currently considered as part of the COWA target. What does the data tell us about part-time SIMD20 students and fair access?

Fiona Burns: You are absolutely right that part-time students are not currently part of the COWA target, but we monitor that element and report on it in our report on widening access. The Open University in particular has a strong intake of students from SIMD20 areas. It offers modular courses—you can do almost anything you like at the Open University—so it is a great asset to have alongside the wider COWA target. However, you are absolutely right that the COWA target currently relates to only full-time students.

Jackie Dunbar: Should part-time students be included in the target? You did not say what data is coming out regarding them. Are they able to access things relating to fairer access?

Fiona Burns: We do consider that, but including part-time students would skew the picture slightly. There are more part-time students in the higher quintiles, so including those students would change the picture entirely with regard to what we are trying to do with full-time students.

The commission on widening access, of which I was lucky to be a secretariat member, looked at the issue in depth but felt that we needed to focus our attention on the inequity between full-time students at that point. That is what we committed to doing, but we still report and have data on part-time students.

We have quite a lot of measures in the outcomes framework and assurance model. As well as the COWA target for full-time students, there are two measures relating to SIMD20 and SIMD40, which cover all students—part-time and full-time students. Institutions must report on that, and we monitor progress. Our approach does not pull out part-time students, but they are included alongside the COWA target for full-time students.

Jackie Dunbar: The SFC provides about £5 million of funding for access programmes every year. What can you tell us about the impact of those programmes and how they are evaluated?

Erica Russell-Hensens: We fund a number of access programmes, a couple of which I have

mentioned already. The national schools programme, for example, which attracts the largest amount of our funding, supports about 50,000 young people per year, and that number has grown significantly over the past couple of years. We have just conducted a strategic review of the programme to consider its impact and the work that it is doing. That review has made a number of recommendations, one of which is about measurement and evaluation, so your question about how we can enhance and develop the work that we are doing is absolutely on point.

We have a number of other programmes, such as the Scottish wider access programme, which I also mentioned. It has about 1,800 enrolments every year. Although the numbers have changed in recent years because of the impact of the pandemic, about 71 per cent of those who enrolled in the 2023-24 academic year successfully transitioned to university. That is a fantastic figure. As I said, the programme supports adult returners who are coming back into education and who do not have qualifications that would support their entry into university at the point at which they join the programme.

Fiona Burns might want to speak a little bit about our work and successes with care-experienced students.

09:45

Fiona Burns: We are not expected to be a corporate parent under the legislation, but we choose to act like one. We have published our "SFC's National Ambition for Care-Experienced Students", which includes ambitions relating to intake, retention, successful completions and articulation. Many organisations, including the Scottish Government, have focused on care-experienced students, and I am delighted to say that the intake of such students is at a record level. The bursary has certainly helped. The group is well represented in relation to articulation—the level is above that for the general population. We recognise that we have more work to do on retention and successful completions, and we are committed to doing it.

That shows what is possible when there is a clear focus on addressing disparities in the outcomes for a small group of people. Colleges and universities have really responded to that challenge. If we put in the effort and focus on a certain group of people, we can achieve a turnaround in outcomes, but it takes a laser focus and determination from everyone involved.

Ross Greer: I will follow up on the point about care-experienced young people. Do you collect equivalent data for estranged students?

Fiona Burns: Yes, we do. When Stand Alone sadly closed, we made a commitment to the charity that we would improve our data on estranged students. We collect such data for both sectors. There might be some underreporting, so we have some work to do, but we have a really good starting point. That work mirrors what we do with care-experienced young people. As I said, if we focus on a certain group, we can make a change if everyone is committed to it. That is now happening with estranged students, which is important. They have very similar challenges to those of care-experienced young people and, as a group, they have fantastic talent.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. No one will be surprised by my line of questioning, because I have asked the same questions previously. Certain institutions are hitting the Government's SIMD20 targets, but I am often asked by institutions whether there is flexibility in the funding packages. Is there a role for the SFC to play in how we achieve the targets and how the institutions are funded in the future?

Jacqui Brasted: As we have discussed, there is the widening access and retention fund, and colleges have access and inclusion funding. We support a number of widening access initiatives. Our funding model will evolve as we think about what we are trying to deliver through our funding. Our funding tries to achieve a range of things in supporting all institutions and the value that they bring. There is not an exclusive focus, but I do not think that you would expect there to be.

George Adam: Last week, the commissioner for fair access said that some institutions are hitting the targets, because of demography, but that it is more difficult for others to do so. Is that one of the key issues that you will look at? At the end of the day, we want to ensure that we are doing the best for young people.

Jacqui Brasted: There are two elements to that. There is the directing of funding to institutions that deliver support, which we already do. For example, as we have talked about, half of the widening access and retention fund goes to two institutions. The other element involves identifying a basket of measures that will help us to identify the activities that the institutions that are struggling with SIMD20 learners are doing, so that we can demonstrate what they are doing on widening access. We think that they are doing more than is recognised by the SIMD20 measure alone. Things such as free school meals or child support payment would potentially be quite helpful, but there is no perfect measure that would work for everybody.

George Adam: I get that. One thing that is forgotten is that, even in urban Scotland, SIMD20 is not a fantastic measure, because it basically

varies over two or three streets. When you look at a map, the SIMD20 area will be bright red—in fact, one of the areas is right outside this building—whereas other streets around it will be better. I understand that there are other ways to measure.

On the data that we currently have, can you tell us a wee bit more about the sector's ability to meet the 2026 target and the 2030 target using SIMD20 alone? What could we do with some of the other measures?

Jacqui Brasted: Fiona Burns is closer to the detail on SIMD20, so I will pass that question to her.

Fiona Burns: We have looked at that in some depth. It is very difficult to say whether we will meet the 18 per cent target by 2026. The early indications are that there will be an uptick, which is definitely a positive in our journey towards that target.

On what is serving institutions' ability to meet the target, there are three main pipelines. The school pipeline is a significant one. The even more significant one is the college sector pipeline, which is the main one through which universities can source people from SIMD20 areas with the right qualifications and who are looking to take on degree-level provision. Then, there are adult returners. That pipeline is very difficult to predict, because it could involve absolutely anybody.

We monitor the situation, although it is challenging, because we need the correct people with the right qualifications to be able to enter university. We cannot give a guarantee that the target will be met, but we believe that it is possible. We will have to do some work in the next few years to get there, and we are reliant on those pipelines being able to provide the numbers and the talent pool that we need.

With all that said, institutions constantly review their contextualised admissions processes. They want to get to a point at which that process is letting in people with the right talent who can progress to degree-level provision. The institutions consider what that might mean for the grades and qualifications that people have and how to widen that out to consider a wider range of talent. The institutions are doing amazing work in that regard to make the most of the talent that they have available to them to help us to get to the 18 per cent target. I would say that it is possible, but we cannot guarantee it.

George Adam: There are projects such as the UWS foundation academy—

Fiona Burns: That is a fabulous example.

George Adam: It involves going out to schools to encourage young people who possibly never thought that university was for them and to try to get them into the institution.

Fiona Burns: Absolutely. There are a lot of people in that "not yet" category, but, with support and perhaps top-up qualifications, entering university is absolutely a possibility and an option. We like to say that no doors are ever shut, so there is a way, and we are determined to make that happen.

George Adam: Thank you.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I am conscious that, at the start of the evidence session, there were a lot of positive comments. For example, you said that the target is very ambitious and that we exceeded it early on but then there was a bit of slippage. However, there is substantial confidence that you are back on track, and the early indications are that things are looking good.

Inevitably, and not unreasonably, the committee has focused on some of the challenges and issues. It is important to learn from success, but we often just rush past that in Scotland. However, if you do not understand how you have been successful, you are missing valuable information. Has any work been done to identify how you have managed to succeed to the extent that you have so far?

Fiona Burns: We recently published an insight briefing, which does that very thing. It looks at what we have achieved since the publication of "A Blueprint for Fairness". By "we", I mean the wider "we"—the institutions are absolutely at the forefront of that. The wonderful thing about that work is that it outlined successes that are beyond the targets. It shows not only that people in that group are getting in but that the degree outcomes are going up, as well, which we should be incredibly proud of. They are doing incredibly well within the institutions that they go into, and that is all credit to the institutions.

There is a raft of evidence and examples of things that institutions do to make that work, such as by supporting people, including at graduation ceremonies. I could not name just one thing—they do so many things.

Keith Brown: In trying to understand how you might have succeeded, you will want to know whether you have done so by design—that is, that the outcome was intended. I am the least experienced of the committee members in this area, so I could be completely wrong, but my general impression is that one reason that led to some of the success is the financial incentive for further and higher education institutions to look and compete for students. Therefore, rather than being by design, because universities and colleges really need to get in students in order to

get funding, they make themselves much more open to students.

Fiona Burns: You have to watch what is happening, so that that competition does not become detrimental. On the other hand, you could argue that the fact that institutions have been competing for SIMD20 students is a wonderful thing and that it has widened out student choice for that group.

The commissioner for fair access makes points in his report that, in the next phase of the work, there needs to be a collaborative effort that gets us to fair access, particularly for the college sector, which we might describe as fair access in a box. The statistics show that almost a third of full-time further education students are coming from a SIMD20 background, and the figure is well over 20 per cent for higher education, as well. They are so important as we progress with fair access, and we need to make the system truly tertiary and work together.

Competition is good, but we need to be careful in the next phase.

Keith Brown: We have been talking about some of the groups that you are getting data on. Is any data collected on, or is there any initiative in relation to, ex-service personnel entering further and higher education?

Fiona Burns: Yes, we collect that data, too. It is in our report on widening access.

Keith Brown: Is there anything that you can say about that?

Fiona Burns: It is early days. When the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's report was published, we had a flag in place to enable us to monitor that—we had requested that from the Higher Education Statistics Agency. The data is quite new, but it is available, and we will work to ensure that the numbers are accurate. That information is now being reported in our report on widening access.

Daniel Proudfoot: It is collected for colleges as well as for universities, as Fiona Burns said.

Keith Brown: Is any of that based on relationships that institutions might have with the armed forces and resettlement schemes, for example?

Erica Russell-Hensens: There has been a lot of activity in that regard, as Fiona Burns alluded to. An example of that is the work on which the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Partnership has been leading to map qualifications of military and veteran personnel to the Scottish credit and qualifications framework, and to support a mapping tool, which will enable people to understand how the skills and qualifications that they have acquired through their service map to that.

That is just one example of the support that is available. There are also examples of individualised support that institutions provide. Again, they are often best placed to design that support, because they understand their learners and their needs much more than we do.

Keith Brown: You referred to how complicated it can be for young people to make decisions, given the complex landscape and so on, so I was tempted to ask how much more complicated it would be for those aged 14 rather than 17, but I will leave that for another day. I am sure that you will be asked that question in due course.

10:00

The Convener: The Funding Council has a range of responsibilities and challenges. Where does widening access rank in your list of priorities?

Jacqui Brasted: It ranks quite highly. It has been included as a priority in the ministerial letter of guidance to the SFC. One of the outcomes in our outcomes framework is focused on access, and, to support it, there is a cross-cutting outcome, which applies across the framework, relating to equality, diversity and inclusion.

The Convener: Do you have a risk register? Do you have a formal process in which you allocate resources based on your priorities?

Jacqui Brasted: We have a delivery plan. We are developing our delivery plan for 2025 to 2027, and we are finishing working through the last quarter of the 2022 to 2024 delivery plan. Widening access is one of the priorities in that plan.

The Convener: Did you say that the plan was for 2022 to 2024?

Jacqui Brasted: Sorry—it is the plan for 2024-25.

The Convener: Is widening access part of that?

Jacqui Brasted: Absolutely.

The Convener: Is it an integral and crucial part of the plan?

Jacqui Brasted: The activities that we have talked about in our evidence relate to that—absolutely.

The Convener: Those are all our questions on widening access, but it might not surprise you that we have some other questions, given that, last week, we asked Universities Scotland about on-going issues in the university sector. Can you comment on the announcement that the Cabinet

Secretary for Finance and Local Government made ahead of the budget vote on the £15 million for the University of Dundee? What is your understanding of the commitment that she made?

Jacqui Brasted: I believe that the cabinet secretary announced £15 million of financial transactions, which are basically low-interest loans, to support sustainability for institutions such as the University of Dundee, so the money is not restricted to that university. At the moment, we are working through an internal process to allocate the funding, so we are not in a position to say how much of it will go to the University of Dundee or any other institution.

The Convener: The headlines said that £15 million was going to the University of Dundee—I understand that none of us in this room writes the headlines, but that was certainly the narrative that came from the debate in the chamber. However, last week, we heard from Universities Scotland that there is no guarantee that the money will go to the University of Dundee. How long will the process take? Is it likely that the university will get 90 per cent of the money, almost 100 per cent of it or 50 per cent of it?

Jacqui Brasted: We cannot speculate on what proportion of the money will go to the University of Dundee. We are considering how best to use the funds, and we need to go through an internal process. Ultimately, the decision will be made by our board. We will have more information soon, but we are not at that point right now.

The Convener: When can we expect an announcement? As you are aware, there is a lot of interest in the matter.

Jacqui Brasted: We do not know the amount of money that the University of Dundee might request from us, so—

The Convener: Is it the case that, if it asked for £15 million or more, it would be in the best position to get that, and that, if it asked for £7.5 million, there would be money for other organisations?

Jacqui Brasted: We will need to work through our internal process for allocating the funds based on who else might be in the mix for funding and what the financial transactions might be used for.

The Convener: What discussion did you have with the Scottish Government prior to the announcement in the chamber?

Jacqui Brasted: We have been working closely with the Scottish Government and have been providing it with advice on the situation with the University of Dundee, as we do across the broader sector. However, the quantum of funding was a matter for the Scottish Government; it determined that £15 million of financial transactions would be announced.

The Convener: When did you find out that it would be £15 million? When did you know what your board would have to work with?

Jacqui Brasted: I cannot remember the precise timing—I apologise—but it was quite close to when it was announced. I cannot remember whether it was immediately before or at the time of the announcement.

The Convener: Was it maybe just at the time of the announcement?

Jacqui Brasted: I suspect that we knew slightly before, but I am afraid that I cannot remember off the top of my head.

The Convener: And at that point you had explained things to the Government, and it was aware of the processes that would have to be carried out to allocate the funding.

Jacqui Brasted: The Government is very familiar with how our board makes decisions.

The Convener: So, no one could have been in any doubt that, when other members were being encouraged to vote for the budget for £15 million for the University of Dundee, the announcement did not actually guarantee £15 million for the university.

Jacqui Brasted: The Government would be aware of how our funding allocations work, how we make those decisions and the responsibility of our board in relation to that.

The Convener: I am sorry to press—I know that a couple of members want to come in—but is the thinking that we will know this by the end of the month? Is it a matter of weeks, or could we be some time down the line before we know how that funding is going to be allocated?

Jacqui Brasted: We are taking funding allocations to our board in March. This may be part of that, but I am not close to that—it is not my area of operational responsibility.

The Convener: I am surprised that you are saying “may”. Is there any reason why a significant public announcement like this—

Jacqui Brasted: I am sorry—I said March. It is going to the board in March.

The Convener: No, I meant the word “may”, rather than “May”.

Jacqui Brasted: Oh, right.

The Convener: Why was it not “will”?

Jacqui Brasted: It may be that it goes to the board as a separate paper, if it is more urgent, or the timings might not fit with existing meetings.

The Convener: So it could come before your March meeting.

Jacqui Brasted: It could do, yes.

The Convener: I thought that you meant that it could be after. When is the meeting in March?

Jacqui Brasted: I think that it is the 20th.

The Convener: So we are looking towards the end of the month.

Jacqui Brasted: We can confirm if that is not correct.

The Convener: Thank you. I call Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: We do not have the time this morning to fully unpack how we got to where we are with Dundee university, and I appreciate that that is not why you were invited here this morning, but one of the suggestions that I have heard with regard to how things have reached this point relates to the SFC's powers of intervention and involvement when individual institutions spiral towards the situation that Dundee is now in. I recognise that processes are under way to fully understand how things got to this point, but is it fair comment that the SFC's current statutory powers are restrictive or inadequate? Perhaps you wanted to go further and intervene earlier, but, as currently set up in statute, your organisation did not have the necessary power to do so.

Jacqui Brasted: It is fair to say that we have the powers to intervene and work closely with Dundee on this situation, and we have been working incredibly closely with it from the time that the issue was notified to us. I do not think we have been restricted in what we have been able to do.

As for how the situation has come about, we will be undertaking a joint lessons-learned exercise or investigation—depending on your preferred terminology—into that. We will be working closely with the university and appointing someone to undertake that work in order to understand the root causes of what happened and how this came about.

Ross Greer: Obviously that process has not yet been carried out, but am I correct, and being fair, in concluding from what you are saying that part of the issue was the point at which you were informed by the institution of the challenges that it was facing, and that perhaps it would have been useful if you had been alerted far earlier?

Jacqui Brasted: I think that it is for the lessons-learned exercise to determine who knew what when.

Ross Greer: Fair enough. Thank you.

The Convener: Will that be made public? Is that something that we as a committee can see and scrutinise?

Jacqui Brasted: I understand that the intention is for the outcome of that exercise to be published.

The Convener: And the committee can look at that.

Jacqui Brasted: Absolutely.

The Convener: It would not just be an overview; it would be the full lessons-learned report.

Jacqui Brasted: We are still scoping at the moment what that would look like, but I do not see why we would not be able to share that information.

The Convener: Thank you. I call Miles Briggs.

Miles Briggs: This all started with the University of Dundee, but last week, we heard about the concerns that were being sent around University of Edinburgh staff with regard to its financial situation. Have other institutions approached you, either formally or informally, to express concern about where they are? What is your current assessment of where university finances sit?

Jacqui Brasted: Our team of financial analysts look at the information that we receive from institutions; we receive information on finances multiple times a year, and it is not only historical but forecast information that is provided. The team review and analyse that information; they test the assumptions underneath it to identify risk; and they regularly engage with institutions on these things.

As we said earlier, it is for institutions to ensure that they are financially sustainable and able to deliver for their students, their staff, their communities and Scotland. We expect institutions to do that. We look at risk, raise questions and have conversations with institutions where we have concerns. The funding environment is such that institutions are looking very closely at how they are spending their money, how they are supporting students and how they can work in a more efficient way. We would encourage that regardless because, ultimately, it is value for money for public funding that is really important.

However, those things are for institutions to determine, and it is for them to ensure that they are sustainable. We engage when we have concerns or need information to understand in a bit more detail their assumptions and the actions that they are taking.

Miles Briggs: With that in mind and given the data that institutions are providing to you, how many institutions across Scotland do you have concerns around? How many are likely to see a financial deficit? We are finding out about the deficits only when the institutions decide to make an announcement, whereas actions could be

taken and more conversation and scrutiny could be taking place.

Jacqui Brasted: It is worth saying that an institution reporting a deficit does not necessarily mean that it is at risk of financial failure. That is an important point to make. On the way that we look at financial risk, if someone is forecasting a deficit, we look at why they are forecasting that, what actions they are taking, what mitigations they are putting in place and whether those mitigations seem to be sufficient. So, the judgment that we make around that is much more rounded.

Miles Briggs: Is it only Dundee and Edinburgh universities that are having to do that at the moment?

Jacqui Brasted: Many institutions are looking at their cost base and how sustainable they are, but we would expect them to ensure that they are sustainable as a matter of routine anyway, as part of the terms and conditions of our grant.

Miles Briggs: Okay, thanks.

Keith Brown: Like Miles Briggs, I am keen to understand the context and what is behind the pressures that are bubbling up. I think that we can all see those pressures, whether they are due to 14 years of—let us say—restrained public expenditure or the pandemic. What is the situation as you understand it with comparison to England and Wales? I know that Newcastle University, the University of Sheffield and a number of others have some problems. What is your understanding of the situation in Scotland as compared with the wider UK?

Jacqui Brasted: In terms of financial challenges, we are seeing a very similar picture across the UK. That is interesting in and of itself. On what is being reported in the press, there are certainly institutions that are looking at making cuts to costs, at their staff base, at how they can do things more efficiently, at their portfolios, and so on, so I think that it is a common challenge across the UK.

Keith Brown: So, the pressures are not particular to Scotland?

Jacqui Brasted: They are not uniquely Scottish, no.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Nonetheless, the issues here are of concern. Education is devolved, so we have an interest in this. We spoke about widening access this morning. Do you have concerns about the ability of institutions in the environment that we have just discussed to continue to cross-subsidise in order to support the widening access agenda?

Jacqui Brasted: It is right to raise that question. We provide additional funding that is for widening access activities, and that will continue. We expect that funding to be spent to support those students in that way. From that point of view, that activity will continue regardless. Obviously, it creates some challenges—

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Sorry, I meant to ask whether you think that the funding that you give institutions covers all the costs of the additional widening access aspects that we have discussed this morning.

Jacqui Brasted: I do not have the details to hand. Fiona, do you want to come in on that?

Fiona Burns: It is a really difficult question to answer because when the COWA target was introduced and the “A Blueprint for Fairness” work was done, it was not so much that SIMD20 students or students that were in poverty coming into institutions necessarily required a lot more investment per student but that the system was inequitable and needed to change. That has been done through the admissions processes, but if you put more finance in, institutions could use it to do even more work than they do already. At the very beginning, the funding was about equity rather than necessarily additional support for students—although some students absolutely require that and it should be put in place as well.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for accommodating those final questions, as we took advantage of the other witnesses who were in front of us to delve into what is a topical issue at the moment. I also thank them for the evidence that they submitted prior to today’s session and for their answers. This is quite a short inquiry that we are doing on widening access. Your input has been extremely helpful, and I am sure that you will look out for our report, which will come out in a couple of months’ time, with interest. On behalf of the committee, thank you for your time today.

10:15

Meeting suspended.

10:29

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back, and I welcome to the meeting our second panel of witnesses. Graeme Dey is the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans. He is joined by Shirley Laing, who is director of lifelong learning and skills, and Clara Pirie, who is a senior policy manager in student equalities and fair access at the Scottish Government. Thank you for joining us today.

Minister, I understand that you have an opening statement.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Just over 10 years ago, the Government committed to establishing a commission on widening access. To put it simply, we did so because talented students from the most deprived backgrounds were underrepresented in our universities, and we wanted to change that. It was not just a matter of numbers—it was a matter of fairness and the future of our society.

Since then, we have seen record numbers of disadvantaged students reach university, and I think that we should all be incredibly proud of that. Credit for that belongs to our universities, which have made brilliant progress on widening access. I thank colleges for their contribution, too. My regular engagement with universities, including at a round table in January, has only reinforced to me how committed they are—as are we—to building on that progress. Indeed, we do need to build on it.

I am grateful to the committee for providing an opportunity to focus on how we can do that. We all know that we have targets to meet, and that the next interim target in 2026 looks to be challenging. We are at risk of hitting a ceiling due to the single measure of SIMD that is being used. We know that the SIMD can be a blunt tool; our role is to help universities to overcome those challenges, and as part of that, we are progressing work to transition towards individual measures such as free school meals.

We are working to overcome data-sharing barriers, including through using the pilot in the north-east, on which I previously updated the committee. We have also undertaken activity to better understand access for students in remote and rural areas, and we continue to progress efforts to implement the commissioner for fair access's recommendations, including on changing the institutional SIMD targets.

That work is as much of a priority as it was 10 years ago, and I am committed to going further. Following suggestions from the sector at the recent round table on widening access, I am exploring how we can better reflect the role of part-time study in the widening access targets. A consultation on part-time study is also a valuable step towards widening access, because, by gathering insights into the needs of part-time students, we can better understand the barriers that they face and explore potential solutions. It is therefore my intention to launch a consultation, prior to the summer recess, on part-time study and support for disabled students.

I look forward to hearing the committee's questions.

The Convener: Thank you for those opening remarks and the announcement, which is very welcome.

You will have heard a lot of the discussion with previous panels about the unique learner number. Can you give us your view on that, on any challenges that you think that there are to implementing it, and on why it has not been implemented before now?

Graeme Dey: I absolutely get the principle of what is being asked. Obviously we see the advantage of having a unique identifier. It would improve our ability to track learners, allowing us to conduct more robust analysis that would help us evaluate our policy decisions; it would help us carry out work to identify access students earlier; and it would make it easier to share data to support learners at key points in their journeys. We absolutely get that, and in principle, we are absolutely in favour of it.

I noticed, in some of the committee's evidence last week, talk of this being a resourcing or financial issue. Of course, there are resources involved in scoping, establishing and then running such a programme. However, that is not currently the principal barrier. It is not as simple as just introducing a unique identifier; I wish that it were, because I am, in principle, in favour of it.

I make it clear to the committee that, as we work through some of the challenges in this area, we are doing so not because we do not want to implement this measure, but because we want to overcome those challenges. Ultimately, a unique number is a solution, so we are committed to taking it forward. We will work with the commissioner for fair access and with those in the sector, who I know are enthusiastic about it, and see where we can get it to.

The Convener: That sounds positive, but I do not think that I have heard from you why it cannot be done. If resources are not an issue, which is encouraging to hear—

Graeme Dey: I did not say that they were not an issue—

The Convener: But it is not the driving force behind preventing the introduction of a unique number.

Graeme Dey: That is right.

The Convener: What are the issues, then?

Graeme Dey: Some of the issues are similar to those that we have encountered with some of the other measures that we have looked at. It is about data sharing—that is the fundamental challenge that is effectively holding back some of the progress that we would like to make. It is because of the data-sharing platform that exists in

Scotland—although "platform" is perhaps the wrong word. That is the impediment, but we are approaching all of this from the standpoint of how we can find a way to make it happen.

The Convener: We overcome data-sharing issues all the time. The field is evolving continuously and the issue cannot be an insurmountable challenge.

Graeme Dey: We have invested time in considering some of the other measures that have been talked about, such as the child payment and free school meals, but we always come back to the data-sharing restrictions that we face. I wish that it were otherwise, to be honest.

I reassure you that we are constantly considering whether there is some way of making the unique learner number happen. I am happy to continue to update the committee on that, beyond this inquiry.

The Convener: I do not want to be difficult, but to me, that is no reassurance, because everything that we have heard in our evidence says that it should happen. You sound positive, but you are also non-committal. I put this question to the previous witnesses only an hour ago: are we going to be in a situation where everyone is positive about the measure but we are always questioning why it has not been introduced?

Graeme Dey: We can do only what we are able to do. My enthusiasm for the measure is the same as that of other people's, and that is the case for some of the other measures. I am frustrated at some of the barriers that we encounter, and we are actively looking at how we overcome them, because all the measures that are being talked about would be of huge benefit to us as we look to hit the target—and, more than that, just do the right thing. If we can implement it, we will do so. That is basically what I am saying to you.

The Convener: Okay.

You mentioned resources. What estimate have you made of the cost of introducing the unique learner number?

Graeme Dey: My reference to resources was more in the context of comments that were made at last week's meeting. Others talked about the resource that would be involved.

There is a resource point but, if it reassures you to hear that resource is not a barrier to introducing the measure, I would just say to you that I do not think that we have costed what this would cost us. That has not been foremost in our thinking; foremost in our thinking has been how we could introduce it, because we see the benefits of it.

The Convener: That does not give me any reassurance. You might have thought, having heard last week's evidence, that one of the questions that you would get asked was how much this would cost. It worries me if the Government has not done that work. I accept your point that cost will not be a barrier, but you cannot say that 100 per cent if you do not know what the cost will be.

Graeme Dey: In the first instance, we need to know whether we can introduce this. That is the starting point, and that is what we are working through currently. As I have said to you on a number of occasions, the reason for its not being introduced is not, as some of your witnesses articulated last week, to do with resource and cost. That is not at the forefront of our thinking; our thinking is on how we can get to the point at which it might be possible to introduce the measure, because we absolutely get the merits of it.

The Convener: However, there has been zero costing.

Graeme Dey: I am not aware of a costing, and I have not sought one, because I am not looking that far down the road. At the moment, I am looking at whether we can implement it. However, I am happy to look into that and write to the committee on it.

The Convener: That would be useful, because, as you have highlighted, the issue has been put to the committee, and we will have to say in our report that the measure has been highlighted to us, but no one knows how much it will cost. I think that I am correct in saying that the Government will be the one to cost it.

Graeme Dey: Even if we come back with merely an estimate for you, we will look to do so.

The Convener: Would implementing the unique learner number require legislation? That is another question that we have put to our witnesses. Some believe that it might, some are not sure and some think that it would.

Graeme Dey: I am not clear on that—I seem to remember that it might not. Again, we will write to you on that. I am being a bit vague, but that is because we have been completely focused on whether we can implement it in the first instance. We would then look at how we would do that.

The Convener: Surely the question whether it will require legislation is crucial to whether you can do it.

Graeme Dey: My reading is that it would depend on the nature of the data sharing involved.

The Convener: You already share data with other parts of the United Kingdom on a number of different issues.

Graeme Dey: But there are restrictions on that. My understanding is that people, institutions and

organisations can share information with the Government, but there might be an issue with regard to whom the Government can then share that data with. It is a complex landscape—frustratingly so in an instance such as this, in which we all know what we would like to do.

The Convener: I will make this as a personal point, as I do not speak on behalf of the committee, but I am a bit disappointed that you have come here today, unable to answer what I think are basic questions. This is quite a short inquiry—yours is only the fourth panel of witnesses—and this theme has run through all of the evidence that we have received so far. Therefore, I was a bit more hopeful that we would have some solid answers. I was not expecting a commitment, because I understand that Governments have to make choices, but I am disappointed that you cannot tell us today if this measure will require legislation and that you have said that you have not even looked at the costs. I just want to put on record the fact that I find that disappointing.

Before I move to other members, I want to ask you about Professor McKendrick's first report as commissioner for fair access, which he submitted in January of last year. It took the Government until September to respond to it. Why did it take so long? Further, the commissioner plans to produce his second annual report by March, so when can we expect the Government's response to that?

Graeme Dey: There were two contributory factors to the delay in responding to him last year: the first was the purdah period created by the UK general election, and the second was the parliamentary recess periods. This year, we do not have a UK general election coming up. We anticipate the commissioner's report in the spring—you say that it will be in March.

The Convener: That is what he told us on the record last week.

Graeme Dey: Given the impetus behind this activity—I should add that the commissioner sits on our forum with the universities, and that he advises us—I would look to respond more quickly than we did last year. However, I should also point out that I do not, of course, know what is in his report. I have given you the reasons why last year was different.

The Convener: They are different to the reasons that the commissioner suggested last week to us. Did you see that evidence?

Graeme Dey: I did not.

The Convener: He said that there were issues around data sharing that required further clarification. When you suggested that one of the reasons was to do with purdah, I saw the same look on the faces of your officials that was on my face, because the report was published in January, and the election was in July.

Graeme Dey: Yes, but you will appreciate that, when a report is presented, we take time to analyse it and come to some conclusions. We ran into the purdah period and the recess period. As soon as the parliamentary recess was concluded, we responded to the report.

The Convener: I will accept that I am wrong if I am putting words into Professor McKendrick's mouth, but he said that it was about data.

Graeme Dey: Actually, I do recall that, when I looked at the evidence, I saw that he had said that. That is not my recollection of the reasons. I will look into the matter again, but my understanding is that it was for the reasons that I have just given you.

The Convener: Professor McKendrick produced 20 recommendations in that report, and the Scottish Government agreed with, or partly agreed with, 19 of them. The one that you disagreed with was about extending his remit into tertiary education. I have heard the reason for that, but do you want to explain the reason for that further and say whether that continues to be the position of the Scottish Government?

Graeme Dey: Principally, we thought that, because of the focus on the targets, it was important that the commissioner's continued focus in assisting us was on the university piece. Nevertheless, I understand his argument. I am not going to sit here today and roll that out—that will be an on-going conversation with him. We disagree on that point, but he understands our reasons. That is where we were then, but the position might change in the future.

The Convener: The proposal comes not only from him: we have spoken to a number of organisations that would like the remit to be extended. The committee has heard that loud and clear. I asked the commissioner whether, given the refusal last year to take the proposal on board, he would continue to include it in his reports. We do not know what will be in his report, but I have taken some comfort from your answer that the door is not closed on this issue and that the Scottish Government will continue to consider it.

Graeme Dey: The door is not closed. This committee might decide to include the issue in its report, and we will respond to it.

The Convener: Thank you. Jackie Dunbar has a question.

Jackie Dunbar: Previous witnesses have talked about the possibility that free school meals could be included as an individual measure of fair access—you touched on that in your opening

comments, and you mentioned the north-east pilot, too. What is your view on using free school meals as a measure? Will you give us an update on how the north-east pilot is going?

Graeme Dey: It is important to understand the context in which all this has been taken forward, which involves genuine collaborative work between the Government, universities and colleges. We have approached the issue from the point of view of accepting that the blunt measure that we currently have represents a barrier, and that there might be something else that we could do. Including free school meals as a measure was suggested as an option by the university sector, particularly by the universities in Aberdeen, where a unique data-sharing arrangement is already in place between the local councils and the two universities, so it made sense to pilot the idea there.

10:45

There are difficulties with scaling that up, which the universities have identified. The pilot has, self-evidently, given us a bit of a test bed to look at how it might work in practice. We ought to use free school meals as a measure if we can, notwithstanding the data-sharing issues. We have also looked at the school clothing grant, which was another possibility but, again, we run into data-sharing issues.

As I said, we have come at this from the point of view of asking what the art of the possible is here. There is a strong argument that, although SIMD20 is the driver, universities would benefit from having a basket of measures that they could dip in and out of. We are keen to put as many measures—or tools, if you like—at their disposal in order to achieve what we all want to achieve.

My understanding is that the pilot in the north-east is quite far progressed with regard to moving into the delivery phase. There was a slight delay on the part of one of the councils, but the expectation is that the pilot will be up and running fairly quickly, and that we will probably be in a position to assess its success or otherwise by late autumn, which would give us a sense of how it has worked.

Jackie Dunbar: Will you make a decision at that point on whether you would like to roll out the pilot across Scotland? Perhaps you already have a timeline for doing that—all being well, of course.

Graeme Dey: Again, the difficulty is what the vehicle is for doing that, because of the data-sharing issue. I will give you an insight into the depth that we have gone into on the issue. We have considered whether it might be possible, as a stop-gap measure, for individual local authorities to establish similar relationships with their local universities. The difficulty that arises is that, if it were doable—it would take a bit of resource and time on their part—it would affect only that relationship. In other words, it would not be open to the whole of Scotland, so, for example, the universities in Glasgow or Edinburgh could not dip into the information that Aberdeen holds.

It sounds like I am constantly coming up with excuses—I am not. I am coming up with the barriers that we are all working to overcome. The committee might have thoughts that we have not come up with collectively, and I would be interested to hear those.

Jackie Dunbar: I understand what you are saying about the problems that you face on data sharing. Will you explain what legislation would be required to enable the free school meals data to be shared?

Graeme Dey: It had been thought at one point that that could be done only through primary legislation, but we are trying to exhaust other possibilities that might allow us to do that. I cannot go into too much detail at the moment, but I want to reassure you that we are looking at every possible avenue to be able to deploy those measures.

Jackie Dunbar: I understand that the legislation is already in place in England and Wales. Will you look at that to see what could be used in Scotland?

Graeme Dey: We are always looking at what works elsewhere. I know that my officials have been talking to their counterparts in the UK, Wales and Northern Ireland Governments, but the set-ups are not comparable. A fundamental change would be required, perhaps through primary legislation, in order to enable us to do that, which is the frustration here.

The Convener: I understand why you want to exhaust all your options, but given where we are now in this parliamentary session, will there be a fail-safe deadline when you have to make a decision on whether to introduce primary legislation? If you have exhausted your options and it requires legislation, when would that be introduced? Parliament would need time to pass that legislation.

Graeme Dey: The reality is that I am trying to exhaust all the options to see whether we can do this. In reality, given the time that is left in this parliamentary session, it is pretty unlikely that primary legislation could be passed before the conclusion of the session, so it might fall to the next one. However, we hope that we could get in such a measure before that, because of the 2026 target and the 2030 target.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have a brief supplementary question on that. Has the minister looked at whether current bills that are going through Parliament on education could be vehicles through which to progress the issue?

Graeme Dey: We must first determine that that is the only route that we could take. None of the bills—given their parameters, taken at face value—would capture that. You will understand the risks of broadening out a bill at the last minute—it is not something that we think is viable.

Miles Briggs: On Monday evening, we met some young people who have navigated the system. We got some really good feedback on some of the reforms, which we will capture and put on the record.

Given the conversation that we have just had, I will go back to the UCAS application process. On Monday, a suggestion was put to us on self-identification. Does the UCAS application form provide an opportunity to improve and broaden out the ability to self-identify early on? A number of people said that they did not think that it was fair to use SIMD20 as the measurement. They thought that taking a case-by-case approach, broadening it out and using school feedback on individuals would be far better. What are your thoughts on using the application process to do that?

Graeme Dey: I will bring in Clara Pirie on that.

Clara Pirie (Scottish Government): At present, through the UCAS application, all applicants can declare whether they have received free school meals or have experience of care. Most universities are not in a position to use the free school meals self-reported status, because it is unverified and is not matched against live local authority data. Therefore, universities do not choose to use that information, for the most part.

The situation with care experience is slightly different due to the smaller numbers. Universities manually check with the relevant bodies to establish whether the status is valid. There is a question about resourcing for universities. The process that takes place elsewhere in the UK is much more automated and relies on mass data sharing, which means that universities need not undertake the task manually.

We are in discussion with universities and UCAS about using alternative ways to identify those young people.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful—thanks.

The committee has also heard that retention figures for SIMD20 students are lower than admissions figures. That was quite telling in some of the conversations that we had on Monday night—we heard about people starting a course but not completing it. The university sector does not necessarily record or is not able to provide that data, which is concerning. We can celebrate someone getting on to a course, but they might not go on to complete it, so we need to do a much deeper dive on that.

Is work being undertaken that focuses on retention and not just on the initial application and acceptance on to a course?

Graeme Dey: At the outset, the parameters were set that measurement is done by using recruitment numbers. I will come back to recruitment in a moment, because an issue is emerging around that.

On retention, I agree that there is an argument for moving to use that as a measurement, because I think that it is more accurate. You are right to point out that there has been a retention issue, but that applies to students in general, and we can trace that back to factors such as the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

At the most recent widening access forum meeting, the topic of retention and whether we should look at retention numbers rather than recruitment numbers came up. To be fair, a number of universities could articulate the scale of the issue that they are facing.

The other point that we have heard about—anecdotally, perhaps like your conversations on Monday night—is that some of the universities are now finding that they are identifying students who would qualify under widening access but who, due to the cost of living crisis, are declining offers because their family or financial circumstances mean that they must find a job. We want to bottom that out to see the scale of the issue. The information is anecdotal, but an issue is emerging that is related to external factors.

We are very much alive to all that, and it is forming part of the discussion. I do not disagree with your point about whether there should be a formal measurement process.

Miles Briggs: One of the other aspects to this is the simplification of some of the support that is available. Quite a number of people to whom we spoke mentioned passporting with regard to accessing support. Some of the conversations were about the inclusion of other groups—young carers, for example. There has been a welcome focus on care experience through the Promise, but people who were here on Monday night said, “We know friends who wouldn’t be able to access any of the support we currently access.” What plans will the ministers make or what review will they conduct to move towards the development of a single passporting of support for students to help widen access?

Graeme Dey: I would not necessarily use the phrase "single passporting", but I accept that there is a need to simplify the support landscape. There is no doubt that it can be difficult for young people and their parents and carers, where appropriate, to identify what is available when they are in some of those groups. You mentioned young carers, who sometimes face really significant challenges. I am particularly interested in that group, and I am sympathetic to the idea that we could look into doing something more there.

Widening access has been a major success—we should not lose sight of that—and I give credit again to the universities for that. We have done fantastic work. We are now in the territory of learning the lessons of the past nine or 10 years. What has worked well and what has not? What do we need to do to complete that journey and to embed that approach in our education system? It is about refining that.

There are a number of issues to overcome. We are certainly open to listening to the universities—we have quite an open forum with them—on their practical thoughts from the coalface on what could be done better. If you have had those conversations with young people, I would be fascinated to look at that feedback as well.

Miles Briggs: Okay. Thanks.

John Mason: I do not want to go over the same issue again and again, but it seems to me that the problems with data sharing are not just to do with education—they exist across the board. During the Covid pandemic, we were told in the COVID-19 Committee that Scotland has some of the best data in the world but that researchers and people cannot access it. When I deal with individual constituents in my casework, I keep coming up against the barrier that organisations will not talk to me because they are so terrified of sharing something that they should not share. I do not know whether you can answer this, but is there a wider problem with the general data protection regulation? Has it gone too far?

Graeme Dey: When there is a giant bear trap in front of you, Mr Mason, you do not want to step on it. I am not going to go there on that wider question—I am underqualified to comment on it. My focus is on my element of the education portfolio. As I have outlined to the convener, I am frustrated about the impediments to doing what is, after all, the right thing. However, we are working very hard to identify the means that will allow us—I will not say to get round the problem—to deliver on what we want to deliver.

John Mason: Which Government minister should I put that question to?

Graeme Dey: Which of my colleagues should I drop in it, do you mean?

John Mason: Fine—I will let you off just now, but I want to pursue the issue, because I have been thinking about it. Thank you very much.

The Convener: I might be wrong, but the Minister for Parliamentary Business—the minister's former role—also deals with data and suchlike. One of the committee members is a former Minister for Parliamentary Business as well. As I say, I might be wrong—I am just trying to be helpful.

Graeme Dey: Mr Mason's point is well made and I understand it. As a constituency MSP, I understand his frustrations.

John Mason: I will pursue that with someone else. I will find the right person.

There have been a lot of arguments against using SIMD as a measure. I quite like it because it is clear cut—you can draw a line on a map. I take other members' points that there are poorer people who are not in the SIMD20 areas and there are richer people who are, but the measure is quite clear cut. It keeps a focus on the wider areas, such as my constituency in the east end of Glasgow, where it is clearly not just one or two families who are in deprivation; it is a lot of people. As has often been said, a poorer household will do better in a better-off area than a poorer household that is surrounded by other poorer households.

Should we continue to use SIMD but add in other factors as well? I think that that is where the commissioner was going last week—that we should still use SIMD as a headline measure but bring in more factors.

11:00

Graeme Dey: Absolutely. SIMD has delivered well, up to a point, but we have to recognise that there are young people in non-SIMD20 areas who would qualify under the widening access umbrella. I think that you heard evidence last week citing the fact that Orkney, Shetland and, I think, the Western Isles, have no SIMD20 areas. It is beyond the realms of credibility to think that there are absolutely no young people living in those areas—particularly on remote islands—who might qualify. Indeed, our colleague Liam McArthur brought that to my attention a few months ago, and we discussed it at the most recent forum. The universities are now considering their approach to island communities.

I absolutely get your point about SIMD20, Mr Mason, and no one is talking about doing away with it; the question is what more we can do there. Some of the universities have contextual nuances in their policies, which allow some of them to go a little bit further—or they choose to go a bit further. We are looking to share that best practice—if you

want to call it that—across the sector, pushing the envelope a bit to see what more can be done.

John Mason: Another factor came up in our discussion with the Scottish Funding Council: just because of the volume of poorer households in a place such as Glasgow, we find that Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of the West of Scotland are doing a lot of the heavy lifting. Is it your view that they are getting enough support to do that?

Graeme Dey: If the principal of Glasgow Caley were sitting here today, he would openly admit that the university has an advantage for some simple things here—although I hate to use the word "advantage". It is surrounded by SIMD20 areas, but it has a bus station on its doorstep. The ability of young people to travel in and out of Glasgow to go to that university is far greater than is the case in remote and rural settings.

Considering how the WARF is delivered, such universities are specifically funded for the work that they do. The funding is targeted to support them. As you can see from the numbers, GCU contributes a third of the total, I think, and there are moneys that follow that.

John Mason: On a slightly different angle, Miles Briggs referred to the session that we had on Monday evening, with two groups. I was in a different group to Miles; our group was with ethnic minority young people, discussing how they had got on in getting to university. One of the themes that arose was the complex landscape. They had struggled to get information about getting to university. That is partly an issue because they arrived during their secondary schooling—they were not at their school from secondary 1 all the way through. Some of them did not know that they could go to university via college; they thought that they just had to have multiple highers to get there. Guidance teachers might not have been aware of graduate apprenticeships. The students we met were very able, and some of them had worked out what to do and then told their guidance teachers.

Do you have any thoughts on that? Is that part of the problem?

Graeme Dey: That touches on a wider issue that is occupying a lot of my time in the area of reform—the careers advice that is available to our young people. We intend to make some changes to tackle some of the points that you have just made. There is an issue about our young people being entirely equipped to make the decisions that they are going to make about their futures.

On the point about young people not knowing that you can go to university through college, that is the right route for a number of young people. I met a number of apprentices this week in the context of Scottish apprenticeship week, and they were telling me that it was not through the advice that they had been given at school that they had ended up in their current roles—and they were really enjoying them. There is undoubtedly some work to do there.

Mr Mason, both you and Mr Briggs have reminded me that we need to do a piece of work in the context of the forum but away from the forum: to sit and engage with young people on this topic, as you have done, so as to understand their experiences and to help inform our thinking. I will take that point away.

John Mason: That is great—that is helpful.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I want to ask about one of the things that you announced earlier, minister.

The Convener: Could we have Ms Duncan-Glancy's microphone on? That is perfect now, thank you.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. Take 2.

Minister, at the beginning of this evidence session you announced a consultation on two specific groups of students, if I remember rightly. Can you tell us a bit more about what that consultation seeks to ask and find out? What will you do with its results?

Graeme Dey: You and I had an exchange in the chamber a few weeks ago, did we not, when you reminded me about the commitment that had been made to look at the issue of disabled students?

We are open minded about the range of the consultation and I am happy to engage with you on that. The topic has been raised with regard to both the part-time element, which is a long-standing issue, and disabled students. The other week, I looked at the numbers for disabled students and there is a great variation among certain disabilities: for some, access to university is improving but one or two others are going back the way. I would like to understand why.

There are particular issues. Some long-serving members of the committee will remember its work on Ms Duncan-Glancy's Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill, which we did when I was on the committee. A memorable piece of information was given to us by, I think, the University of St Andrews. The information was that, if a student does not have an unconditional offer from a university, it can be August before the student knows that they are going to that university and can engage with it. When a university has resources in place for disabled students, those are focused on the students that it already knows about, who are in years 2, 3 and 4. When new students present in August, their needs are often a surprise to the university. It scrambles to provide

support and does not always achieve that. That stuck with me as we worked on the bill.

More and more disabled students are going to university, which is a positive, but are we doing enough to properly capture and provide the support that those students require? That is not just about student funding. I want to understand whether we are doing that. If we are not, what more do we need to do?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate that, and thank you for the offer to work together. I would be happy to take up that offer.

Last week, Rebecca Scarlett from Lead Scotland gave evidence. It is important to repeat what she said about the review of support for disabled students that was carried out in 2019 and reported in 2023. Rebecca said that disabled students had

"put a huge amount of resource, energy and time into the review."

She went on to say:

"The report, which was finally released in 2023, made a ream of recommendations, almost none of which has been implemented. I know that Scottish university heads submitted a request to the Scottish Government that that be taken forward, but next to nothing has happened. Nothing has changed, even in relation to the smallest recommendations that were made, and now the work is all out of date. All that energy, resource and time were invested, but nothing has happened, which is extremely frustrating."—[*Official Report*, *Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 26 February 2025; c 44-5.]

What will be different this time? Can the minister reassure organisations that engaging this time will result in change?

Graeme Dey: I do not entirely accept that description. A number of things were done on the back of the review. For example, there is currently a pilot online application service for students to apply for disabled students allowance, which is on track to be rolled out this year. Some work has been done on updating the student portal. However, I accept that there have been issues. I hope that those who might be viewing that element of the consultation with a degree of cynicism recognise that I would not commit to it if I were not serious about delivering on it. I am keen that we engage properly on this.

There are a number of areas. We have done well with care-experienced students, but we can perhaps do better. You and I have previously discussed apprenticeships, Ms Duncan-Glancy. I am not convinced that we are doing enough in that space. It is my commitment, in the year that I have remaining in the Parliament, to do as much as I can to identify what more might be required. That should be informed by the lived experience of those who have gone through the system or are attempting to navigate the system.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate that. Thank you.

A group was convened on the back of the 2023 recommendations but has not been reconvened. Would it be fair to ask for that group to be reconvened, with the recommendations of the previous report as a starting point? Could any action that is taken seek to build on those recommendations and action them further, without undoing any of that work and making people feel that they have put in a lot of effort for no reason?

Graeme Dey: You said a moment ago that, according to the individual who gave evidence, a lot of that work is now out of date. We would need to take account of that. I was reading a briefing on the findings the other day, and we could certainly base some of the consultation on that. I will take it away and think about reconvening the group. That might feed into the consultation. I am happy to engage further on that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The group had a lot of expertise on it, from both universities and people with lived experience, and the minister might benefit from reconvening it.

I turn to questions on broader support. We have heard a lot of evidence that wraparound support for students is becoming more difficult for universities and colleges to fund due to financial pressures. What is the minister's response to that?

Graeme Dey: Do you mean for students in general or for widening-access students?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I probably mean for both, if I am honest. However, in this context, we are talking about widening-access students. In its evidence, Universities Scotland said:

"We heard from the commissioner that there is a recognition in other countries that increased needs require increased investment",

but that

"That is not necessarily what happens in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, *Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 26 February 2025; c 43.]

Therefore, it is probably about that group of people.

Graeme Dey: In my near two years as a minister, I can think of only one occasion when someone told me that they had enough money and they walked that back a few weeks later. It is a fact of life that both Opposition politicians and stakeholders will constantly tell ministers that more money is required. I am sympathetic in the space of student support, notwithstanding the financial and budgetary restrictions that we are working with. What is expected and asked of our

universities is increasing and is more wide-ranging than before, and not just in the context of widening-access students. I am sympathetic to that. I have a budget in this portfolio that we must work to, but this is an area in which, if there were something on which we could do a bit more, I would like us to do it, because it is, at times, challenging for the universities.

That said, the approach that the University of the West of Scotland has taken is showing real promise; we are waiting to see the first round of statistics on that. Its approach is that it does not wait until a student comes forward and says, "I have issues." In universities, the challenges that students face often do not manifest themselves until just before exam time when, for example, they will say, "I've got a problem here; I have dyslexia," or whatever. However, UWS has a proactive approach, whereby it issues a survey before a student joins the university. You might be aware of that. Up to 67 per cent of the students are filling that in, which allows UWS to identify challenges that those students might face, whether that is caring responsibilities, needing a job, the hours of their job or whatever. UWS has been trying to tailor its offering without disrupting the university's approach to supporting those students. I am told that the first tranche of data is encouraging, and I have been encouraging other universities to look at it. The commissioner for fair access visited UWS to have a look at it for himself.

There are things that you can do, but I accept that there are financial challenges. It is an area that I would like to be able to do more on.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The UWS example is a good one, and it speaks to the point from my colleague earlier about having to say only once that you need something, doing so early and having the time to do that. You recognised that, if people do not have their conditional offer in time, there is not much time to do that, so the example is useful.

You talked earlier about some students not necessarily staying on and leaving education for other reasons—perhaps to go and take work for financial reasons—rather than what might be best for their future career prospects. The National Union of Students Scotland published a report saying that education is free, which we all support, but that studying is not. On that basis and in that context, do you think that the current way in which spending on student support is structured means that it reaches the students who need it the most?

Graeme Dey: I am not sure that I entirely understand the question. That NUSS report said, in essence, that we should put more money into student support. Are you suggesting that there is a way to ensure that it reaches those students who most need it?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do you think that the support is sufficient for people who need support to get through university, to fund the additional costs that they might have, or do you need to look again at how student support is targeted?

Graeme Dey: Targeted or increased? There is a difference.

We have the best student support package that we have ever offered in Scotland—indeed, the support that is available has increased markedly over the past few years in recognition of the challenges. However, we all know that there is a limit to what we can provide. If you are suggesting that we could better target that support, I am certainly open to considering what that might look like.

It is, of course, challenging for students. I have met students who have moved from other parts of Scotland to study in Edinburgh, for example, and the cost of accommodation in Edinburgh is extremely prohibitive. I absolutely understand all that. However, sitting here today, we have to be realistic and recognise that there is a limit to what we can provide.

11:15

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Finally, submissions from the Open University, UWS and others have mentioned the value of part-time studying. We heard about that this morning. Obviously, the part-time fee grant, which is available only to those earning under £25,000, has not been reviewed in a while. Is the Government considering a review of that?

Graeme Dey: Clearly, that will form part of the consultation and we need to look at it as a starting point.

It is interesting that you touched on the Open University. There is a strange anomaly in all this. The Open University rightly receives funding under the WARF scheme, because of the work that it does. However, we do not count those students in the overall target and I am not entirely sure why, as the performance in that area is higher than what is shown in the bare statistics that we have in front of us. I am not trying to suggest that we should go back and change the statistics, but the situation is strange. The Open University and part-time education are important in all this.

George Adam: Good morning, minister. I am glad that you mentioned UWS—you know the adage that all roads lead to Paisley. Do colleges and universities have a role to play in attainment in general? I will use UWS as an example. Earlier, I mentioned its foundation academy, which goes into schools and ensures that young people who are not looking at that type of career consider

going to university. UWS also has its historic agreement with St Mirren Football Club, where young people who want to be young Graeme Deys look to a future in sporting journalism. With that in mind, do you see a role for colleges and universities in closing the attainment gap?

Graeme Dey: Let us deal with universities first. In the context of trying to increase the widening access pool, universities have done things proactively. You talked about UWS. The new programme that it has established with New College Lanarkshire, which I hope to see shortly, is a good example. Let us acknowledge that universities are doing lots of other things behind the scenes for which they are not given credit—pretty much every university is doing that. Universities also enter into more formal arrangements.

In the context of the colleges, there are examples of good practice, too. However, I was quite struck by a comment that, I think, Lydia Rohmer made to the committee last week about school-college partnerships—she did not refer to them by that name, but that is effectively what they are. She talked about the Government being reluctant about those partnerships and viewing them as double funding. I would like the chance to clarify that. The SFC identified an issue with a number of colleges using up to 22 per cent of their credits on school-college partnerships, which were not directed at widening access programmes, as they were not trying to stimulate that cohort and to support them. They were much wider than that and they also strayed into primary schools. The SFC took a view that that was not necessarily what credits were for and that they should primarily be focused on the college offering. It would have been more sympathetic if a clear line could have been drawn between all that activity and widening access but it was not possible to do that.

There is a role, although it is primarily for local authority structures, with good financial support from the Government, to deal with the attainment gap in the context of younger people.

George Adam: But you will be aware that, in local areas, there are partnership agreements between the institutions and the local authority that should be working.

Graeme Dey: Absolutely.

George Adam: So there should be a key role for those institutions, but it will also be dependent on the demography of their areas.

Graeme Dey: It is more than that. For example, we are all aware of the issue of getting young women into careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The University of Edinburgh sends its STEM undergraduates into primary and secondary schools around Edinburgh and the Lothians to actively engage with young women in those schools to encourage them down that path. That is the type of activity that I am talking about, and it is not always publicly recognised. Our universities do fantastic work in this space, and we should be ready to acknowledge that.

George Adam: I have one final question, which I asked earlier. It is about the sector's ability to meet the 2026 and 2030 targets using the current SIMD measure. I am perhaps asking you to look into a crystal ball, but could we use the SIMD figures along with a basket of other measures, such as free school meals?

Graeme Dey: As I said at the outset, there is no doubt that meeting the 2026 target will be challenging using the measures that we can currently access. However, as the commissioner said last week, we should not be entirely hung up on the 2026 target and do things that are predicated purely on that. We ought to be looking to the longer term and things that can be embedded in the approach that will enable us to hit the 2030 target and ensure that it is part of the landscape.

It depends on what we can do on the data-sharing issues and how quickly we can launch some of the measures but, realistically, 2026 is challenging. However, I believe—in fact, I am certain—that the mindset of everyone who is involved is to be absolutely focused on attempting to meet that target and that, beyond that, they are 100 per cent focused on delivering the 2030 target.

As I said at the outset, our job is to assist the institutions and to give them the tools that they need to achieve that target. I cannot stress enough the constructive way in which everyone is working to that end.

George Adam: I will just add that I have been in and out of this committee since I have been a member and I feel that people—in particular, the institutions—are now more proactive with regard to hitting the target. I talk quite a lot about UWS and Glasgow Caledonian hitting the figures, but others seem to be coming to the party and delivering something, which was not the case three or four years ago.

Graeme Dey: The table that the Scottish Parliament information centre produced for the committee is clear that pretty much everyone is doing their bit. The commissioner's ask for individual targets is a good one, because some universities have easily got to where they have got to and can go beyond but, for others, there are additional challenges.

I should have said earlier that we are waiting for a formal response from Universities Scotland, but we understand that the university sector is agreeable to the approach that the commissioner has suggested, and we will be looking to take that forward as quickly as we can.

George Adam: Thank you.

The Convener: How would that be taken forward? The suggestion from the commissioner was interesting, but it raised questions about why no one could see, at the inception of the targets, that institutions that have lower numbers meeting the criteria will struggle to meet the targets.

Graeme Dey: I take that point, but hindsight is a wonderful thing. When the Parliament launched the approach, no one envisaged a pandemic or a cost of living crisis or that SIMD20 on its own would not get us there. You learn from the experience as you go through. I thought that there might have been a bit of resistance to the commissioner's suggestion, but it appears that there is not. That is indicative of the commitment on the part of our institutions to deliver on this.

The Convener: What needs to happen on that? Is it just that you write a letter and the institutions change the criteria, the recording and the analysis of the data?

Graeme Dey: We are about to move on that once we get a formal letter. I will write to you and advise on that. It could be done pretty quickly. I do not think that it will become onerous and require structures to be put in place.

The Convener: Thank you.

Keith Brown: Minister, in relation to data collection, you said at the start that you want to do it and that you want to work out whether we can do it, how we can do it and how much it will cost, which seems to be a perfectly logical way to go about things. It strikes me that, in all the evidence that we have heard today and last week, nobody has talked about data collection issues. Everyone has been keen to rush past the issues that might exist, but it is worth mentioning that we are talking about people's right to have their individual data protected.

That said, John Mason's earlier point is very strong. There was a time, perhaps two years ago, when increasingly it was becoming recognised that GDPR had gone as far as to prevent UK public bodies from doing things that they wanted to do—in particular, in comparison with bodies in other European countries.

It is hard to judge from what you have said, because we do not have specific examples of the current hurdles, as you see them. It would be good to get an answer to John Mason's question whether the Government has a view on how data protection and GDPR could be refined in order to make them more effective. Are you able to give any examples of issues that have turned up so far and have proved to be problematic?

Graeme Dey: With respect, it is way above my pay grade to comment on the Government's view of GDPR. To correct one thing, the issue is not the gathering of data. The data is gathered and held: it is sharing of data that is problematic.

I will give an example. If you share a certain data set, the attached risk is that you can share information about the individual, which is, by default, beyond what it is intended that the data be used for. I will not give specific examples. If a data set has been gathered using multiple sets of information and you are sharing that data for a particular purpose, are you, essentially, giving away more detail about an individual than they might want to be shared, or more than it is appropriate to share? That is one of the challenges in the issue.

Keith Brown: I understand the point about data that is already held, but my objection regarding how we share it remains. Let us be honest—private companies seem to be able to overcome such obstacles, sometimes scrupulously and sometimes not.

There seems to be a consensus that the target should be renewed and refined. If we still remain, after having done that, with a blanket target of 18 or 20 per cent, whatever its basis, is not there a risk that we could achieve or exceed the target but still have pockets—as we heard last week, the situation is very uneven across the country—where people who would really benefit from widened access do not, which the blanket target would obscure?

Graeme Dey: Indeed. That is why we are looking at a basket of measures. The forum has opened the opportunity for everyone to throw in their ideas from an informed position, and we have had additional input, including from Liam McArthur, relating to rural areas.

Following the experience of the past nine years, we understand better the areas in which the approach has gaps. The question is now how we address them. Data sharing is part of that, but there is more to it. In order to capture more students, some universities use contextual admission policies, but others do not share that practice, which is particularly troubling in rural areas. What do we do in that space? I absolutely get the issue. I offer you the reassurance that we are now much more alive to the full range of challenges and are intent on addressing them.

Keith Brown: Implicit in that, is the idea simply that moving to the free school meals measure

would not necessarily give you enough refinement?

Graeme Dey: None of the measures alone gives us enough refinement or gets us to the target. We are going to have to be very smart about developing a full range of measures to enable, if we can, our reaching the target.

We are not resetting the target—it is in place—but to answer your question I note that we are making sure that, underneath the target, we can look at the country and satisfy ourselves that we are doing a far better job of reaching all the young people who would qualify for admission, rather than, as was alluded to earlier, GCU and UWS admissions making up such a large proportion of the target. They would still make up a large proportion in the target's delivery, but we need to satisfy ourselves that we are delivering an agenda by which we reach far more young people, particularly in the rural and island areas that we are missing at the moment.

Keith Brown: Apart from large tracts in rural areas where there are SIMD20 pockets, we also miss semi-rural areas—such as Alloa, in my constituency—which have levels of deprivation that exceed those in many parts of Glasgow, but do not have the same opportunities.

11:30

Graeme Dey: My constituency also has pockets of deprivation: you make a fair point. I cannot stress enough the amount of energy that is being spent and the effort that is being made across the piece to complete the journey in the way that you have articulated.

Keith Brown: I am not entirely sure what to expect as an answer to this question—actually, I do. It seems to me that, although, in all sorts of ways, the Government and public authorities were seized by the idea of acting with urgency during the pandemic, we have now dropped back into old ways of working. Is the Government aware of that and guarding against it? I think that the committee is unanimous in thinking that a degree of urgency would be really useful in this matter. I know that there are always competing priorities, but has the Government learned, from the pandemic, lessons about how to move quickly on some issues?

Graeme Dey: I was laughing during that question at the idea that I do not expect my officials to act with urgency on pretty much every topic. They would probably laugh at that idea, too.

I understand the thrust of your argument in that, as a society, we seemed to be able to act with urgency during the pandemic, but I do not think that we have necessarily lapsed back into a less urgent approach. There is a lot to be done, and all that I can offer is the assurance that everything that sits in my portfolio is a priority.

The Convener: You have asked other witnesses a question about veterans, Mr Brown. Given that the minister for veterans is here, do you want to ask it?

Graeme Dey: Thanks for that.

Keith Brown: I confess that, when I bumped into Mr Dey outside the chamber yesterday, I asked him the question.

The Convener: Having something on the record would help us with our inquiry, if that is okay.

Graeme Dey: I was quite struck by Mr Brown's question last week—

The Convener: Mr Brown, do you want to repeat the question so that everyone who is watching is aware of what we are talking about?

Keith Brown: My question is simply about what monitoring is done and what data is collected relating to people who move from the armed services into further and higher education. I am not asking about the armed forces covenant in that regard—although I and many veterans are sceptical of its worth—but what data is collected? What relationships are there between the military and further and higher education institutions and associated bodies, particularly in relation to resettlement courses and people moving from the armed services into further and higher education, especially since there are so many early service leavers these days?

Graeme Dey: Your point about early service leavers is a very good and obvious one. Earlier, Mr Mason asked about access to information so that people can make an informed decision and understand how to progress to university. As you well know, Mr Brown, getting information about what is open to early service leavers, in particular, can be very challenging.

I think that 10 universities have signed up to the armed forces covenant—I saw the numbers just yesterday—but I accept your point that there is another way to join. A number of other universities take account of military service in their approach.

The honest answer is, as is the case with many things relating to the veterans community, that we probably do not do enough. Your line of questioning last week prompted me to commission a piece of work that will look more closely at whether we are doing enough to ensure that our universities are alive to their responsibilities—if that is the right word—in the context of veterans.

When individuals transition out of the armed services, it is incumbent on the military to equip them with the information that they require. We both know that the situation has improved over

recent years, but it is not perfect. I will undertake—outwith the committee's inquiry, because the work will take a bit of time—to write to Mr Brown and the committee with some detail on that issue, because he has set something in train.

Keith Brown: For many years, I have advocated that, when somebody joins the armed forces, they should immediately put their name down for housing for when they leave the armed forces, as they are entitled to do. As the minister said, there should be an obligation on the armed forces to look after people, and it could be useful to have a wee discussion at the start of somebody's armed forces career about what they might want to do in relation to further and higher education. Perhaps the UK Government could respond to that point.

Thank you for answering my question.

Graeme Dey: I should say that the new UK veterans minister has been excellent to deal with thus far. I will add that issue to the conversation list for the next time we meet. There is a genuine and positive relationship between us and the UK Government on the subject. We are all committed to doing the right thing by our armed forces community.

The Convener: That is good. Thank you.

Ross Greer: I will follow up on Pam Duncan-Glancy's line of questioning about support for disabled students and disabled people who aspire to be students.

Corseford College provides a unique offering for students who have complex needs and would find it challenging, if not impossible, to attend other colleges. I am aware that there are people who live far outwith reasonable commuting distance of Corseford who regularly get in touch with the college to ask whether it is aware of such an offering being available elsewhere in Scotland. The answer is that there is none: Corseford is unique.

I know that the Scottish Government supports the college and that you have had discussions with it. What wider conversations are you having about an equivalent offering to Corseford's being available to everyone, regardless of where they live in Scotland? Perhaps that will be wrapped up in the review that you discussed with Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Graeme Dey: Let us deal with Corseford first. It was a pilot. When I came into post, we extended the pilot for a period. Unfortunately, up to that point, no formal review of its outcomes had been conducted.

My understanding is that Corseford was designed to provide an educational offering for young disabled people, then a transition to additional educational opportunities further down the line. The analysis of that has not been done; it is currently being done. In the budget, through the conversations with the Liberal Democrats, a sum of money has been identified that, subject to the outcome of the review, will be available for such provision. We need to understand what works at Corseford and what does not. That will help to inform our thinking. You are right that it will feed into the wider piece of work that you mentioned.

Collectively, we need to do better in supporting disabled students. In some instances, it is resource intensive for individual institutions. I am open minded on that, but you will appreciate that we must take the issue forward based on evidence. The review that is being conducted externally will help us to identify what has worked effectively and what might not have worked. That will inform our thinking.

Ross Greer: I absolutely take the point about the need for the review and the need to gather evidence. Regardless of the outcome of the review—whether it is that the Corseford model works or that a different one is required—there is an obvious need. Would the Government prefer that that need be met by provision that is funded through the regular SFC funding model—that is, by a recognised SFC-funded institution?

Corseford would say that the funding arrangements that it has are not ideal. There are funding pots coming from various directions and there is a lack of certainty about funding. I give credit to the Liberal Democrats for securing the funding for the coming year, but we should not need to look at it year on year, which happens because the college is separate from regularly SFC-funded institutions. Is the goal to mainstream it into the SFC funding model?

Graeme Dey: That is a difficult question to answer, because Corseford College was a pilot. That is why it was funded as it was. It was intended to determine over a two-year period what worked well and what did not.

I do not want to prejudge what future models will look like until we have the outcome of the pilot. We are getting into the territory of mainstreaming or non-mainstreaming and whether the SFC should fund specific provision. I suspect that that will be for a successor minister. I am simply committed to exploring the matter and to gathering the evidence to allow the Government and the Parliament to make the right decisions.

Ross Greer: What is the expected timescale for publication of the review and the Government's response?

Graeme Dey: On Corseford?

Ross Greer: Yes.

Graeme Dey: My understanding is that the review is just getting started. We are providing some analytical resource to support that. We are talking about a matter of a few months, because we will have to come to conclusions. I do not have specific timescales right now, but it is a matter of urgency, for obvious reasons.

Ross Greer: That is ideal. Thank you.

On a different matter, when our parties were in Government together through the Bute house agreement, one of our policy commitments was to establish a guarantor scheme for estranged young people. Will you confirm what the Scottish Government's current position is on whether that will proceed, and say what support is being provided for estranged students in particular, who have unique challenges in accessing housing?

Graeme Dey: We talked earlier with Ms Duncan-Glancy about finite resources. I absolutely understand the commitments that were made to look at that scheme. As you are aware, Mr Greer, a fresh look was taken at it last year for a number of reasons, not the least of which was cost. In some respects, the costs are indeterminate because it is difficult to predict how many estranged students would look to take that scheme up. We know that some universities are already doing something in that space.

It is not possible, principally on financial grounds, to commit to doing that at the moment, but I recognise the need.

Ross Greer: I recognise that and appreciate the discussions that we have had in the past. Would the Government be able to put some of the costings and estimates that it has made in the public domain? I am conscious that we have had that conversation, but I was not entirely convinced by the information that was provided, and I do not want to breach confidentiality. It is the Government's information to put in the public domain, but it would be helpful for us.

Graeme Dey: I think that I am right in saying that you have been looking to make amendments to the Housing (Scotland) Bill. That is a conversation for you to have with the minister who is overseeing that bill.

As I said a moment ago, we think that such a scheme would be prohibitively expensive in the current financial situation, but one of the problems is that it is difficult to quantify what uptake would be. That makes it all the harder to analyse. To be absolutely open, I note that it is unlikely that we are in a position to implement that scheme in the short term, although I recognise the ask.

Ross Greer: I appreciate that. Given that, what is the Scottish Government's offer and intention for estranged students? We talked with the SFC in the witness session earlier today and it collects data on this. One of the commitments that it made to collect the data was in response to the only organisation for estranged young people in Scotland having closed last year or the year before, so no one is advocating on behalf of that group. What is the Scottish Government's intention in supporting them into further and higher education?

Graeme Dey: Can I take that question away and reflect on it? It is a fair question.

We talked earlier about the input to our thinking around widening access for young people. We have not talked to young people, but the committee did so on Monday night. We probably need to engage better with that group, especially if their only representative group no longer exists to advocate for them. Let me take that away and think about what we can do in that space, and I will write back to the committee.

The Convener: Could I ask a wider question about the housing situation for students? We spoke to participants on Monday night about that being one of the potential barriers: it is not just about getting the grades to get into university. You mentioned earlier that some people have been declining their offers because of family circumstances—maybe they have to go out and work rather than go and study, so university is becoming unaffordable for some.

Yesterday, I had a virtual meeting with representatives from the Highlands and Islands Students Association—William Campbell and Shannon MacCallum—and they gave me an example and permission to share it with you today because, although it is a local issue, it needs a ministerial point of view. They have a fellow student who has to travel daily from Angus to Fort William because she cannot afford the student accommodation in Fort William. She can afford to do the travel only for part of the time, then the cost becomes prohibitive.

What do you recognise as being the challenges, particularly around student accommodation and its affordability, to widening access to higher education? What solutions can the Government offer?

You have mentioned the Housing (Scotland) Bill, which what I had a call about with the representatives yesterday. You will know the route between Angus and Fort William. Can you imagine doing that daily to study because you cannot afford the student accommodation and—in some cases—because of the unavailability of student accommodation?

Graeme Dey: Indeed, but that is a wider issue than the widening of access.

The Convener: It is, and it probably relates to your response to Pam Duncan-Glancy's earlier question.

Graeme Dey: Of late, I have been doing a lot of work to engage with other Governments and countries in relation to international students as we look to derisk the situation and attract students from other countries, which is not easy, given the circumstances. We have been exploring what the perceived impediments are with them. Housing and accommodation come up quite a lot.

I met a group of students last week at Edinburgh Napier University who were talking about the difficulty in finding accommodation. Having said all the positive stuff that I have said about universities today, I think that there is something there. Universities are looking to attract students, whether they are international or indigenous, but in doing so they are perhaps blind, to an extent, to the ask that then falls on the student around accommodation. The other day, I heard about international students who face particular challenges with regard to deposits on properties, with landlords looking for additional deposits.

There is quite a lot in that space. Universities deal with that. The purpose-built student accommodation review steering group made a number of recommendations. I am not directly involved in that group, but I am very alive to the issue.

11:45

I am guessing that the student from Angus is not a constituent of mine, or I would have heard of that case by now. That is a pretty extreme example, but the problem exists, particularly for some of our smaller institutions that do not have a lot of student accommodation, if they have any at all. There is therefore an expectation that the students find somewhere to live in areas where it is really difficult to get accommodation.

I am not going to sit here today and say that we have a magic wand with which to address the issue, but I am very much alive to it, because universities have a bit of responsibility in that space. You are right about widening access. The challenges that widening access students might face are more acute. We have been encouraging universities and colleges to work more closely with local authorities on the options

If it is okay, I will add the issue to the agenda for the next widening access forum so that we can have a discussion with the universities about that particular challenge.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That concludes this element of our meeting today. I thank you and your officials for your responses on widening access. You have given a commitment to write to us on a number of points. I asked this of our witnesses last week: because this is quite a short inquiry, getting your response quite urgently would allow us to keep up with our committee schedule.

Last week, we alerted you to the fact that we would have a number of questions for you today about funding for universities, such as the University of Dundee. What is your view on the proportion of the £15 million that was announced by the Government in the budget that should or will go to the University of Dundee?

Graeme Dey: We have to be very careful about the role of ministers in that regard. There has to be a separation between ministers, the SFC and institutions, not least because of the institutions' Office for National Statistics classification. Ministers will not be directly involved in directing the SFC as to how to allocate moneys and on what basis. That said, the cabinet secretary was clear that the moneys were available for the SFC to utilise in the space of supporting institutions with sustainability issues, including the University of Dundee, which is, without doubt, the most pressing example of an institution that has challenges. The SFC is currently engaging with it on the form and scale of support that will be provided. The SFC will also determine any conditions that are attached to that support. There is a daily dialogue between the SFC and the University of Dundee.

The Convener: This is clearly an evolving issue. When you came to our committee at the beginning of January, in the first week after the Christmas recess, we discussed this issue, and then it became a budget commitment on the day of the vote. Where did that come from and why was £15 million the value that was agreed to? At what point were the University of Dundee, the SFC and others who may bid for that funding made aware of that additional amount in the budget?

Graeme Dey: The sum of money that you are talking about reflects money that was available from an underspend in financial transactions. That is how the £15 million figure was added. That figure was announced, as it ought to be, to the Parliament first. Thereafter, it falls to the SFC to have discussions with the relevant parties.

The Convener: But there had been discussions up until that point. We heard from the Funding Council earlier this morning that it had been in dialogue with you in the lead-up to that point.

Graeme Dey: There had been extensive discussions with the University of Dundee in particular about its challenges, and directly with the SFC on a regular basis. I met the new—that is, the current—leadership of the university directly

several weeks ago. It was appropriate to do so, as they had reached the point where they were beginning to articulate some of the challenges to the staff. Discussions with the University of Dundee were taking place. However, as I have said, the £15 million figure was predicated on a financial transactions underspend—those were the available moneys.

The Convener: I have looked at the wording that you have used on the issue, as well as that used by the cabinet secretary when she made the announcement, and I see that the money is for "universities such as ... Dundee". However, looking at the narrative from the Government, do you accept that it could have been construed by some people that this was £15 million for the University of Dundee and that that might not be the case now?

Graeme Dey: It is a matter for the SFC. I understand the point that you make, but I refer you back to the point that I made at the outset about the relationship between ministers and individual institutions, and ONS classification. It is a matter for the SFC to determine how it spends those moneys. The University of Dundee is self-evidently in a different place from where a number of other institutions are in terms of the challenges that it faces. Ultimately, the SFC will make that determination.

The Convener: The cabinet secretary said in the chamber, when announcing this, that members of your party

"will back the budget, which will help to sustain the University of Dundee",—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2025; c 34.]

but, based on what you have said, without being able to guarantee that.

Graeme Dey: I recall saying last week that the support that the University of Dundee will receive from the SFC—whether at the £15 million level or a lesser amount, through that financial transactions funding—is designed to provide it with the breathing space to allow it to bring forward an appropriate financial recovery plan. None of us has ever suggested that this money alone will resolve the issues at the University of Dundee. It will allow it time to work with the SFC—because the SFC will have oversight of its financial recovery plan—and its staff, who will also need to be engaged in this, to come up with a way forward that returns the university to a sustainable footing.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I completely understand the charitable status issue, the ONS classification issue and the limitations that you have, but I am interested in where we have got to with the timescale. You have indicated that a financial recovery plan is being prepared by the university. Do you have an understanding of when that will be available?

Graeme Dey: I am trying to give you an accurate answer, but things are moving at a considerable pace. I could say to you that the SFC is engaging with the University of Dundee on a daily basis, and has been doing so for quite some time. However, convener, I am conscious that, when we had our exchange at a previous meeting, I was saying, "Look—we need to wait for the recovery plan and react to it." Effectively, I am still saying that. It has taken considerably longer than I think that all of us would have wanted to get to the point where there is a degree of clarity on the scale of the issue.

The Convener: Has it taken too long?

Graeme Dey: On the one hand, I understand why it feels that way to the staff, what with all the uncertainty. On the other, we would all expect proper diligence to be at play here as the university, under its new finance director, absolutely bottoms out the scale of the problem and the nature of how it got there, and comes up with a plan that is actually robust. My understanding, Mr Rennie, is that the internal engagement—if I can put it that way—on the shape of the recovery should begin next week.

Willie Rennie: What is happening next week? Can you just go over that again?

Graeme Dey: There is, I believe, a university court meeting next week, and we anticipate that engagement internal to the university—and very initial—on the shape of the recovery will begin next week. You will appreciate that, as I said last week in the chamber, the SFC will, alongside that, have sight of the draft proposal and will be feeding into that and any future iterations of it. That will give the SFC a fuller understanding of the issue as well as the ability to influence and encourage the university in the direction of ensuring that, whatever the direction of travel might be, it returns the university to a sustainable footing.

Willie Rennie: So you should know within the next week what the price tag is likely to be.

Graeme Dey: I did not say that, Mr Rennie. I take you back to what I said earlier about the relationship between the SFC—

Willie Rennie: I did not say, "your price tag". I said, "the price tag".

Graeme Dey: What the recovery plan will do is shed light on the scale of the challenge that the university faces. It will, I anticipate, also identify how the university intends to get itself out of that situation. The SFC is in contact with my officials every couple of days, and there will be conversations at the point at which they identify what that looks like.

Willie Rennie: Will you make a statement to Parliament?

Graeme Dey: I suspect that I will be asked to.

Willie Rennie: I suppose that I am asking you now.

Graeme Dey: The challenge here is that this is an individual and autonomous institution, and it is not for ministers to comment directly on its activities. What I think requires to happen is an open and frank dialogue with the staff and the MSPs who represent the area that the University of Dundee is in. There has been dialogue with both up until now, but it has not been as open and detailed as all those parties would have looked for, perhaps for understandable reasons. From next week onwards, we need to see a much more open dialogue. The convener, who has asked some questions today, has alluded to this, but if there are questions for the Government on this, we are here to answer them.

Willie Rennie: Thanks very much.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate the way in which you answered the price tag question, minister. Can you set out in a bit more detail how the figure of £15 million came about?

Graeme Dey: As I have said, the figure of £15 million reflects an underspend that was available under financial transactions. The SFC budget was increased to that level to give it the flexibility to respond to the situation. It was not a figure that was plucked out of thin air, which I think is what you are alluding to—it was entirely linked to the amount of financial transactions that were available.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: But it was not linked to the scale or scope of any of the challenges facing the sector.

Graeme Dey: Right now, we are not clear on the scale of the challenge at, for example, the University of Dundee. On the wider point, we are aware of action that is being taken by individual institutions to address some of their challenges.

We can sit here and bandy around views as to how that has come about. We can talk about international student recruitment and the policies of the previous UK Government; we can talk about the level of teaching funding that has been provided by the Scottish Government; and we can talk about employer national insurance contributions, energy bills and so on. There are a number of contributory factors, but for a number of our institutions, the simple fact of the matter is that they grew rapidly on the back of significant increases in international student recruitment, which, for whatever reason—I suspect that we do not want to get into that today—contracted. They are finding themselves with nothing like the income that they had, but with the same cost base, and they are taking action to address that.

I recognise that that can be painful in some instances, with job losses, but that is how they are acting. We have never said—and I have certainly never said—that the £15 million was deemed to be a solution to all of this. It was never presented as that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Okay. Thank you.

Miles Briggs: Minister, you have touched on this already, but since you were last before us, the University of Edinburgh has written out to staff to say that it needs to find £140 million. All the press coverage has pointed towards the £15 million fund being for Dundee, but is it actually for all institutions across Scotland that might ask for support? Am I right in my view of the answer that you gave us in that respect?

Graeme Dey: Well, Mr Briggs, the budget process has concluded, and I have to say that I do not recall any of the other parties in that process asking for additional funding for the purpose that you have alluded to.

12:00

Those moneys were included in the budget in response to some of the challenges that the SFC identified. I also point out that those challenges are not unique to Scottish universities and that it is a UK-wide problem. We have seen issues in Wales and in England, some of which are more serious than those that are faced by the majority of our universities.

There is a challenge for our universities, particularly in relation to the recruitment of international students. We will work, through the SFC, with our institutions. It is a big issue but there is no magic bullet and, as you have alluded to, we are not going to be in a position to come up with an enhanced fund that will resolve the issues. I hate to use the expression, but some universities are effectively downsizing to match themselves to their income. In some cases, they are reverting to the position that they were in two or three years ago, before they expanded in response to an influx of students, particularly from Nigeria.

The issue of international student recruitment has largely, and rightly, been blamed on immigration policy, but the issue with Nigerian students was about much more than that and was caused by two deflations of the currency. My conversations with universities show that they are now far more circumspect about how they will grow in the future and that, although they hope for an uptick in international student numbers, they will be more careful about how they grow and about the projections that come from that.

Miles Briggs: I do not know whether the minister heard the question that I put to the SFC witnesses earlier. I asked about their monitoring and about the data reports that they get. I did not get an answer about any other institutions that would be of concern. The minister has now been at the committee twice to answer questions about this. I am not asking him to name them, but are there any other institutions that are in a similar position and that are reporting to Government that they are likely to write to members of their staff about that? I would like to get a picture of what Scotland's university sector looks like now.

Graeme Dey: The SFC has been doing a piece of work on the sustainability of institutions in order to get that broader picture and to ascertain whether any other institutions are in a similar position to the University of Dundee. I think the SFC has a sense that there are no others, but that is not to say that our institutions are not facing challenges, because it is a UK-wide problem. The most recent figure that I saw was that 70 universities across the UK are implementing cuts of between 10 and 15 per cent in response to those challenges. That piece of work is there.

As I said to the committee before, if there are any lessons to be learned from what has happened at Dundee—a report is being written about how that came about—then there will be an opportunity within the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill to look at governance. Part of that governance may involve enhancing the SFC's powers in order to improve its oversight, because, essentially, the SFC's information is only as good as what is reported to it. If there is anything—and I stress the "if"—we are certainly open to looking at how we can better equip the SFC, if that is necessary, to have a clearer picture of what is happening within institutions.

The Convener: I am not sure that you really answered Miles Briggs's first question, so I will ask it in a slightly different way. There is nothing to prevent any other university in Scotland from applying for some, or all, of the £15 million. Obviously, that would be up to the Scottish Funding Council, but we could see university courts putting in bids. Five of them could put in bids for £3 million each—is that correct? Despite what was said in the chamber about the funding sustaining the University of Dundee, could the money actually go to numerous universities, meaning that the quantum per university would be reduced?

Graeme Dey: The SFC will set the criteria for the use of that funding. It is not a fund; it is funding, and it is at the SFC's disposal. I anticipate that the SFC would allocate any funding based on need, and I suggest to you, based on the evidence that we are all aware of, that the University of Dundee has needs that are substantially greater than those of any other institution.

The Convener: It is not unique. Its needs may be greater, but other institutions must be thinking that, if the SFC is going to consider this at its meeting in March—around 20 March, we are told—they might chance their arm and throw in a bid to get some money, because there are requests for funding throughout the sector.

Graeme Dey: Universities may, of course, choose to do that. The point that I am making is that the SFC will make a judgment on the seriousness of the University of Dundee's circumstances and whether there are measures that the university can take, as other universities have done. The University of Edinburgh and Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen are examples of universities that have taken steps to address the issues that they faced. The measures that RGU took, painful as they were, were designed not only to address an immediate problem but to put the university on a sound footing. It should be said that the financial planning of all universities has been undermined. The ENICs situation was a nasty surprise for them, and they are all having to find money to address that.

The Convener: It depends on the criteria, but I think that you are confirming—perhaps you can use the words yourself—that any university in Scotland could seek to meet the criteria to get part of that funding.

Graeme Dey: What I have said to you, Mr Ross, is that the criteria for the distribution of those moneys will be set by the SFC—

The Convener: And it will be open to every university.

Graeme Dey: I do not know whether you raised that question with the SFC earlier. The money has been given, as we stated, for the purposes that we stated. I would envisage, given the seriousness of the situation at Dundee, that the overwhelming majority of the money would be utilised for that purpose, but the SFC will make a judgment call based on its assessment of the situation there and set against any other institutions that might identify as having issues.

The Convener: You said that the £15 million figure was from an underspend. Was that the entirety of the underspend? Did it come to exactly £15 million?

Graeme Dey: My understanding is that it was an underspend of £15 million.

The Convener: Of exactly £15 million. Was that transferred across?

Graeme Dey: Yes, it was transferred across.

The Convener: You mentioned when you were here in January, and you have mentioned again today, that you are awaiting reports. Like you, I think that people were expecting something sooner, but, if we get to the right place, people will accept that it has taken a bit more time. You have mentioned a lessons-learned report. I think that you gave a commitment in January to come back to the committee when you had that report. Is it still your position that you are keen to have scrutiny by local members? I would fully support it if Willie Rennie and others wished to have a statement in the chamber, but sometimes we can get into greater detail in a committee session. Is that something the Government is committed to doing?

Graeme Dey: I am open to doing whatever Parliament asks us to do, although I point out that it is not for Governments to talk about individual institutions and so on. There may be other ways of doing it. It may be that the committee decides to invite the SFC in—and me along with it or separate from it—to further interrogate the issue. The point that I was making at my previous committee appearance was about governance as much as anything. If there is something in what happened at Dundee that tells us that the governance arrangements—both internally to universities and externally through SFC oversight—could be tightened up, we will certainly look at that.

Later this month, I will have a meeting with the chairs of all the universities in Scotland. I have no doubt that governance will be at the top of the agenda for that conversation. I am hoping that the chairs have some suggestions about what they think would work better. Whether that is in the formation or training of courts or whatever, I would be astonished if something did not come out of that meeting that made us aware of what is available to us. It is not about taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut, but if something has arisen at Dundee that would benefit the sector—for example, additional oversight powers or intervention powers on the part of the SFC—we are amenable to looking at that.

The Convener: If that is in the lessons-learned report, we need to see it in order for us to scrutinise it. I presume that the report will be a document for the University of Dundee but will be shared with the Government. Is that your understanding?

Graeme Dey: I would expect it to be shared publicly, frankly.

The Convener: That is what I am getting on to. If the Government is receiving that, you think that it should be a—

Graeme Dey: Sorry. The investigation as to how the situation arose is being conducted independently on behalf of the university, I think. We would expect the SFC to have sight of that, and it is my expectation that it will be available publicly. That is the very least that the staff deserve, and, in my opinion, the Parliament has a role in overseeing that.

The Convener: I think that the committee would agree.

Keith Brown: First, as one of its graduates, I should say that the University of Dundee—along with the University of Stirling, which I represent—is the best university in Scotland.

Secondly, there is a real tension here between, on the one hand, autonomy, and on the other hand, the responsibility of the taxpayer to bail out universities that find themselves in difficulty. From what you are saying, minister, I take it that you are edging towards the idea that there might be a need, through the SFC, to move a bit towards safeguarding the taxpayer's interest in relation to that tension. The matter is not helped by the fact that many politicians and a number of the institutions themselves blur the lines—they will assert their autonomy but, at the same time, expect the taxpayer to bail them out.

I am not saying that this is the case in relation to the University of Dundee or any other university, but it cannot be the case that the taxpayer must always be hit if finances at a university are badly managed. When you talked about governance and the SFC, were you hinting at a greater protection of the taxpayer in all of that?

Graeme Dey: There is another balance to be struck here. Yes, universities are autonomous institutions—you said that it is not for the taxpayer to bail an institution out—but they are major players in local economies. The University of Dundee employs 3,000 people, which is hugely important in the city and the wider area. It also plays a part in the wider landscape of our higher education offering for Scotland and helps to attract students from all over. Universities are hugely important institutions.

I do not disagree with you that an environment can be created in which it might be thought that it does not matter how you run an institution, because you will be bailed out by the taxpayer. That is a consideration. It is also the case that universities receive varying degrees of their income from public sources. For some universities, public funds are minimal—I think that roughly 25 per cent of the University of Dundee's income is derived from public sources.

It is about more than just money, though, Mr Brown. Although I absolutely accept your point, it is about the importance of institutions—not only

the University of Dundee—in the overall landscape in Scotland and the economy. Universities play a hugely important part in Scotland, and it is important that we preserve them.

Keith Brown: I am not questioning that. I perfectly understand the greater economic benefit that an institution such as the University of Dundee—I am not focusing particularly on it—can have and why you would want to see those universities and institutions protected. My point is about balancing the interests of the taxpayer with the perceived real autonomy of institutions. It is a very difficult balance to strike. In what you said about the SFC perhaps taking a greater role in relation to governance, were you recognising that tension?

Graeme Dey: Yes. I am sorry if I picked you up wrongly. You are right. When there is any public financial input to an institution, while respecting its autonomy—I stress, again, the ONS classification's significance for those relationships—it is right and proper that that financial input is protected.

I am choosing my words carefully because we do not know what the outcome of the internal review will be, but I undertake that, if anything comes out of that or anything else—members will scrutinise the bill that I am referring to and might feel that they want to make changes to it by amendment—we are open to considering what could be done and to using that vehicle to strengthen internal and external oversight of all institutions if that would be in the public interest.

The Convener: Thank you very much, minister, and thanks again to your officials for their evidence earlier.

12:14

Meeting continued in private until 12:41.

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