



Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 14 January 2026

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE 2nd Meeting 2026, 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)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)
*Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jonnie Hall (NFU Scotland)
Professor Wayne Powell (Scotland's Rural College)
Garry Ross (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Jeroen van Herk (Unison)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 14 January 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Subordinate Legislation

Education (Scotland) Act 2025 (Consequential Provisions) Regulations 2025 (SSI 2025/385)

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning and welcome to the second meeting in 2026 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

The first item on our agenda is consideration of the Education (Scotland) Act 2025 (Consequential Provisions) Regulations 2025 under the negative procedure. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

As no member wishes to comment, do members agree that the committee does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

Scotland's Rural College

09:30

The Convener: Our next item of business is an evidence session on Scotland's Rural College. I welcome Garry Ross, national officer for higher education at the Educational Institute of Scotland; Jonnie Hall, deputy chief executive officer and director of policy at the National Farmers Union Scotland; Professor Wayne Powell, principal and chief executive of Scotland's Rural College; and Jeroen van Herk, Unison steward at SRUC. Welcome to you all.

We will get straight into questions. I will start with you, Mr Hall, as probably the most seasoned committee witness in front of us. What should Scotland's Rural College deliver and is it delivering?

Jonnie Hall (NFU Scotland): That is a very open question, if I may say, convener. Yes, I am experienced at giving evidence to various parliamentary committees, but this is the first time that I have given evidence to this particular committee. I will put that down as my get-out clause at the start.

It is clear to us as NFU Scotland and, indeed, the wider agricultural industry that we need an effective, operating SRUC and all the services that it provides. It is not just a provider of education; it also has all those innovative and research aspects to its portfolio, including a significant amount of policy research that fuels not only Government thinking, but our thinking and that of many other stakeholders. It would be difficult to envisage life in an agricultural context or a wider rural land-based context without an institution such as SRUC. We can all sit back and reflect and think that we need to improve it and make it work better—we can say that about ourselves all the time, too—but it is important that we consider the role of SRUC. How do we make it the best that it can be, so that it can deliver the outcomes that the industry wants? I am looking at it purely from the industry's point of view. We are not far away but, clearly, improvements can always be made. I suspect that we will discuss some of those improvements and how we get there this morning.

In the longer term, funding and investment will be required to ensure that we feel like we have a pipeline of not only skilled and able younger people coming through the education system, but the innovation, research, technology transfer, knowledge exchange, advisory services and so on that are so critical to the industry and to the farming and crofting community, if that community is to deliver what it is increasingly being asked to deliver: high-quality food production, tackling climate change, delivering on nature restoration and, probably above all in many ways, underpinning our rural communities.

It is relevant and appropriate that the committee is considering how best SRUC can move forward and what funding and so on it will need in order to deliver the outcomes and the outputs that the industry requires.

The Convener: Mr Ross, I put the same question to you.

Garry Ross (Educational Institute of Scotland): EIS's position, along similar lines to my colleague's, is that SRUC plays a vital role across Scotland with regard to the natural economy. From an educational standpoint, however, EIS has always had concerns regarding the merger of the three further education colleges with the Scottish Agricultural College and the distinct shift towards higher education and omitting further education.

A bedrock of further education is required across SRUC and that is being eroded. You cannot move students across into a higher education setting without giving them the proper foundations to do that. SRUC is in a distinct position to be able to provide FE across the natural economy. Few, if

any, other FE colleges have as diverse a portfolio in FE curriculum as SRUC.

That said, the cuts have had local impacts on certain campuses across SRUC, Elmwood being the biggest. We are distinctly concerned that there seems to be a real shift in SRUC and that it is moving towards being a higher education institution and leaving behind its FE obligations. Yes, it is distinct, it requires adequate funding. Everybody will agree that the additional funding in the Scottish budget that was announced yesterday for the universities and the colleges is welcome. However, as I said, we do not want to see the higher education element of SRUC overriding the further education that it should be providing.

Jeroen van Herk (Unison): I have been working for a couple of years now in SRUC and I engaged a lot with our membership before coming to this meeting. Again, SRUC, I totally agree, is a beautiful institution. We often do surveys with students and they love the teaching that they receive, as well as the staff. We have high satisfaction rates in those areas. There are also, however, significant problems in SRUC that have to do with the financial situation that we are in.

However, we also must not beat around the bush. A lot of the issues are caused by high risks that are being taken by the SRUC management, which is a view that has been reflected to me over and over when I have been speaking to our membership. There are significant concerns regarding finances, but there are also a lot of other things happening, such as the way management went about getting international students, problems when it comes to catering and problems with the incredible backlog of repairs—like £70 million-worth. There are a lot of issues, but the problem that we see at the moment is that our membership feels there is a lot of focus on HE and on two campuses, Edinburgh and Craibstone, while the other campuses are a bit neglected. A good example, which Garry also mentioned, is Elmwood. What happened there was an appalling situation for the students and for the staff. Willie Rennie has spoken previously about that. In the past, Elmwood was a flourishing campus and many courses were oversubscribed. Now, the campus building is boarded up and, yes, it is a sad situation.

The Convener: Thank you. Professor Powell, I will first put to you the question about what Scotland's Rural College should deliver and whether it is delivering. Then we will pick up on some of the points from the other witnesses.

Professor Wayne Powell (Scotland's Rural College): Good morning, convener. I am not as experienced as Jonnie Hall at giving evidence, but it is my third time in the Parliament since the new

year. I would like to start by acknowledging that everyone around this table recognises the significance of SRUC as a national asset.

The second point that I want to make is about the importance of SRUC as an independent organisation that can provide independent evidence to support some of the areas that Mr Hall from the NFUS referred to, including the inheritance tax changes that were initiated recently, which are fundamental to the farming and rural communities.

What have we delivered? If I may, convener, I will start with a couple of examples of that because it paints a picture of an organisation that is delivering an ambition for the future that is perfectly aligned to Scotland's ambition. The first is that SRUC provides more business support to small and medium-sized enterprises than any other college or university in the United Kingdom and that is largely down to the knowledge exchange programme that we provide at SRUC.

We are also the first organisation in 15 years to obtain taught degree-awarding powers, which has completely and utterly transformed SRUC's educational delivery and the delivery of rural skills within Scotland. For the first time, we have a progression system from FE to HE with the same regulations under the same organisations. We have some wonderful examples in this booklet that I am holding up and in the link that we shared with the committee that illustrate that transition. For the first time, our students and learners can progress from Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels 4 to 12, and come and go in that framework in an agile manner.

We have also completely revamped the next generation agriculture programme, with input from industry, to support both FE and HE delivery. At the foundation level, our students spend between five and 10 hours per week on farms. We have an FE and an HE integrated programme within SRUC that is at the heart of our ambition as a tertiary organisation delivering on the genesis of the formation of SRUC, which was about creating a coherent delivery of rural skills across Scotland in an effective and efficient manner.

We have also created Scotland's first tertiary vet school in 150 years. We have attracted investment from UK Research and Innovation and elsewhere to develop the first digital dairy chain in Scotland to support regional economic development. We have won three Queen Elizabeth prizes and today it will be announced that SRUC is the only university or college in the UK that has been selected to develop transatlantic relationships with the United States to celebrate 250 years of the independence of the US.

This is an institution that is delivering. We recognise that we can do more, but we have a track record of delivery and we are here, ready to give further evidence to support that.

The Convener: Do you accept that that very rosy picture that you are painting is perhaps not reflected outwith some of the senior managers of SRUC? For example, yesterday we had a delegation of young farmers in the Parliament on the cultivating leaders programme. I told them that you would be in front of us today and asked them for their views on SRUC and they were not positive. I say that as someone who studied at SRUC. I was at the Auchincruive campus for four years. I am proud to have gone there and of the education that I got at Auchincruive. However, people in that delegation who are currently at SRUC were not particularly positive about their experience. They feel that there is a big shift in interest from you and the management to the vet school, to the detriment of other courses. Indeed, they said that many of their peers were considering going outwith Scotland to study agriculture or rural business management elsewhere. Do you hear those concerns, not just at this committee but outside this room? Have you heard those criticisms?

Professor Powell: I am happy to receive that feedback. I am content to receive that feedback. I am a little bit surprised because—

The Convener: Professor Powell, one second. That is a strange answer. You are content that our next generation of farmers and those in the farming industry are raising serious concerns, so much so that their peers are considering leaving Scotland to study agriculture? You, as the principal of SRUC, are content to hear that?

Professor Powell: Convener, I appreciate the feedback that you are giving me. I want to come on and say that the group that you are referring to will be visiting our beef and sheep unit within the next few weeks and will be exploring the work that we are doing at that beef and sheep unit, which is at the cutting edge of methane capture and the future of beef and sheep farming. I believe that we are making tremendous progress.

I also believe that we are getting the balance between FE delivery and HE delivery right. If we look at the total number of Scotland-domiciled students, 2,600 students are funded through the Scottish Funding Council, 43 per cent of whom are FE. That balance of FE and HE is the same and has been consistent over a number of years, and we intend to keep that balance.

The Convener: Are some SRUC courses being disrupted to protect the veterinary medicine course? For example, yesterday, young farmers on the rural business management course told us

that lectures are cancelled on an almost weekly basis because their lecturers are being drawn away to support the veterinary medicine programme. Do you recognise that situation?

09:45

Professor Powell: I do not have that information in front of me. I have not received that information. I am happy to come back to the committee with further information, if it is required.

The vet medicine programme has been welcomed by members of this committee and by the minister, and I think that it is filling a major gap in what rural communities need. It is also an outstanding example of social mobility and widening access, and it is delivering on what Scotland needs. I am in no doubt at all about the validity of our vet medicine programme and the delivery of that programme.

I am happy to come back to you, convener, on some of the comments you refer to in relation to the specifics. However, I do not have that information and I am not aware of it, although I am happy to follow up on that.

The Convener: Thank you. We have heard from some of the other witnesses that some of the work of SRUC is being hampered in some ways by the high risk decisions being taken by management. Do you recognise that comment?

Professor Powell: The decisions that are taken on academic matters at SRUC are taken by the academic board. We have an academic board, which is composed of many members of staff across all our campuses, and all decisions on academic matters are taken through that board. They are not taken exclusively, in isolation, by the senior leadership team.

The Convener: Come on, Professor Powell. Are you telling me that the direction that SRUC has gone in in the past few years is contrary to your vision for it?

Professor Powell: Excuse me. Could you repeat that?

The Convener: Are you trying to suggest that the direction SRUC has taken in recent years is different from the direction that you would take as principal, because it is decided by an academic body within SRUC? Surely—

Professor Powell: I am not saying that at all. I am saying that we have a clear direction in which we are going, but that decisions on academic matters—which is, I think, the basis of your question—such as decisions on the delivery of courses and the approval of new courses, are taken by an academic board as part of our

governance structure and as part of the higher education governance framework.

The Convener: The comment that I was sharing with you was from earlier this morning, with witnesses saying that the management has taken high-risk decisions—and not just academic decisions, but decisions that show a neglect of other campuses. Do you recognise that?

Professor Powell: No, I do not. The decisions that are taken by the SRUC board are built on sound business cases. That is reflected in the evidence and data that support those decisions.

The Convener: We have received a lot of communication from the Elie and Earlsferry Community Council, and I know there has been some dialogue with it. What has happened with the breakdown in communication and trust? It is an important statutory body in the area that—

Professor Powell: Between whom, sorry?

The Convener: The community council and SRUC. You will be aware of—

Professor Powell: Sorry—which community council?

The Convener: Elie and Earlsferry. Do I have that right? Yes.

Professor Powell: We do not engage with that community council. We are engaging with the Cupar community council.

The Convener: You have had some meetings; I was told that one of the meetings was cut short. SRUC has met with the Elie and Earlsferry Community Council. You have seen in our papers for today's—

Professor Powell: We have met with, as part of the community council, the Elmwood community council, yes.

The Convener: Okay, but when you read our papers for today's meeting, you will have seen quite extensive communication from that particular community council. No?

Professor Powell: I am aware of those exchanges.

The Convener: How does it get to a situation where there is such a breakdown? Clear concerns are coming from that community council about an issue in the locality that it represents.

Professor Powell: Let us go back to Elmwood campus, which is what is being referred to here, I think. Am I correct, convener?

The Convener: Yes.

Professor Powell: We are doing three things at the moment that are fundamental if we are to be able to improve matters at Elmwood. One is the

development of a new degree programme in sustainable golf course management. The second is the initiation of a review by Professor Sir Ian Boyd. I want to thank Mr Rennie for his engagement with us at our last board meeting, which took place at Elmwood. Sir Ian will explore the opportunities for developing future economic and social engagement, built on the assets that we have at Elmwood campus. Also, we are at an advanced stage in negotiations on future partnerships with respect to the Elmwood golf course, which will provide exciting new opportunities. That is at a commercially sensitive stage so I cannot disclose any more about it, but I am happy to come back to the committee on those matters. Convener, we are making progress with the delivery of Elmwood.

Staying with Elmwood, let us go back to a meeting of the Parliament on 30 March 2017 at which some of today's parliamentarians were present. During that meeting, the consequences of Fife College exiting the Cupar campus were discussed—the consequences of removing student places from Elmwood—along with the commissioning of the Rocket Science report to examine the implications of that. What we are dealing with here in terms of engagement with Elmwood goes back many years to decisions that were taken regarding the future sustainability of Elmwood campus. What we have done has saved Elmwood.

The Convener: You have saved it?

Professor Powell: Yes.

The Convener: What is left?

Professor Powell: What is left is a campus that is now potentially investable. We have to be clear, convener. Without Elmwood being part of SRUC, it would not exist. It would not be financially sustainable.

The Convener: Describe for people watching this session what is there now, then. What have you achieved? What is on the ground at the moment that you are proud that you have saved? What I have seen is quite different.

Professor Powell: I am referring to the fact that we have now, in terms of our strategy and the direction that you referred to earlier, a commitment to a tertiary education model, a place-based model—

The Convener: Explain, then, what you have achieved by—

Professor Powell: I am trying to do that. Our strategy has three elements. One is a tertiary model, the second is a place-based model and the third is collaboration with communities to achieve

the goals that we have set out in our strategy and mission.

First, we have a tertiary model at Elmwood. We have FE and HE courses going on together. Secondly, we have a place-based approach, and we have retained our presence at Elmwood. Thirdly, working with the community has proven to be a challenge—the problem that we face is, I think, the negative narrative around Elmwood and what we do not have there. That is causing our staff to be demotivated, it is not conducive to attracting students and it is potentially unattractive in relation to further investment.

I would like to achieve, as I outlined the last time that I was here—it was a session that you convened, convener—constructive working with the community and stakeholders to look to the future of Elmwood. That is what we are doing in the three examples that I provided of what is on the ground. One is a new degree course. The second is a review that is taking place to look at what the future of Elmwood campus would look like. Thirdly, we also have some interesting and positive developments with respect to the Elmwood campus.

The Convener: What is the new degree course?

Professor Powell: The new degree course is in sustainable golf course management.

The Convener: Is that not all online?

Professor Powell: It is online and that is—

The Convener: It can be done anywhere.

Professor Powell: The committee is taking evidence on the future of a tertiary system. We are responding to demand—demand from learners who want to continue working and to obtain additional skills through distance learning and work-based learning.

Gordon Brown's think tank, which I believe Mr Rennie is on the advisory board of, recently published a study, "Agile skills for a changing economy", which repeated the plea that we have to have a different skills system for Scotland to match changes in demographics and the economy. It says that students should have more opportunities to learn while they continue working, where they blend getting practical skills and new skills that can support their future development and are stackable. That is what we are doing. I do not accept for one minute that having distance learning courses is negative. It is also about ensuring that we have parity of esteem between FE and HE, and it is part of that process.

The Convener: A lot of other members want to get in, but I wonder, Mr Ross, how your members

would reflect on what they have heard from Professor Powell.

Garry Ross: Certainly with regard to Elmwood, our members would probably not agree with what Professor Powell has said this morning. You only need to look at the history of what has happened at Elmwood campus with the selling off of assets and the failure to reinvest the money made from those back into that estate. There was an animal care unit on which great expense should not have been spared but which was subsequently shut down.

You also have to take the geographic location into context. The nearest FE college is Fife College, which is 13 miles away, but it takes over an hour to get there by public transport. Therefore, the community around Cupar, and other communities and towns in the area, are now having their access to education eroded. You made the point yourself, convener: the SRUC is looking at opening up other courses and designating them as run from Elmwood but, ultimately, they are distance learning courses and do not need to be delivered from Elmwood.

You also referred to the fact that there have been issues with consulting the local community. Certainly, the feeling that I have been made aware of from those in the local community is that they are distraught about the fact that Elmwood seems to be an absolute shell of what it was. If you look back, pre-merger, you would see that Elmwood College in its own right had over £3 million in reserves and was a flourishing college. At this moment in time, that does not appear to be the case. That has taken place over the 14 years since the merger with SRUC.

Our members are distraught about the fact that Elmwood seems to be bearing the brunt of all of this. There is a distinct feeling that something similar could happen to the Oatridge and Barony campuses as well, and that there is a key focus on investment in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and, potentially, Inverness, with the rural and veterinary innovation centre. That would be catastrophic.

From an FE perspective, SRUC had a bit of a potential safety net when the FE mergers were taking place in 2013 because of the large geographic spread of FE colleges across Fife, the Highlands and Islands and so on. It was able to capture students who would not be afforded FE provision at SRUC. That has also played into the situation. I know that Professor Powell has said that Fife College pulled out of Elmwood, and that it did so because it wanted to take things back to its own campuses, but that has had an impact in the local community. Elmwood was not just a land-based college. It provided land-based courses, but it also provided courses in hairdressing, business

and other subjects across the spectrum of FE. That provision is now no longer there, which is to the detriment of SRUC and the local community.

10:00

Jeroen van Herk: I have many points to make. Management knew for years that repairs had to be done at Elmwood campus and to the residential services there, but they waited and waited, and no repairs were done.

This happened a couple of years ago now but it is worth bringing it up. It was not only the fact that residential services were cancelled but how management went about doing that. Management announced the decision that the residential services had to be closed. At that moment, SRUC was still taking applications for students to come there. Students were absolutely outraged because those who were staying at the residential services were suddenly having to commute from Dundee. It is said that, sometimes, SRUC has a problem with students dropping out and so on, which can be for various reasons, but these issues are contributing to that. Also, it creates a situation where fewer students come to do SRUC courses.

I find it personally hard to speak about SRUC in this way, because I think that it is a beautiful institution because of its people. However, these issues are constantly being created, and the source is the management of SRUC.

Elmwood campus is now boarded up, and although it is fair enough to say that Fife College took significant curriculum out of there, it is the job of management then to make sure that new curriculum is brought in and that more students are recruited.

The biggest issue that we have in SRUC at the moment is that all the departments, wherever you go, are short staffed; staff are also incredibly underpaid yet are taking on more and more responsibilities. Believe it or not, last year an email went out from Wayne Powell to all staff to say we had to cut staffing costs further by £5 million. I do not want to deviate from the issue of Elmwood, but I have an entire list of issues that are happening in SRUC. It was quite difficult to prepare for this meeting because so many people asked me to bring up issues A, B and C.

Elmwood, I believe, is a great example, but it is not just an Elmwood issue. Residential students at Oatridge campus, for instance, do not even have warm water. If you come back after a whole day working in the cold, the only thing that you want is a nice warm shower, and the students cannot have one there. We spent lots of money—millions and millions of pounds—on the dairy nexus, GreenShed, the vertical farm and so on. If that works out, that is great, but there are so many

outstanding repairs that need to be done and buildings that are completely neglected.

I would like to hear a promise from Wayne Powell. Can he guarantee that in the next 10 years we still will have residential services at Oatridge and Barony and make sure that the Barony campus will not go the same way as the Elmwood campus went? I would like to ask him that.

Finally, I would like hammer home the point that we had a fantastic animal care course in Elmwood—it was really outstanding. An initial announcement was made that that course was going to close, and then students protested, which was fantastic. The community in Cupar had a big protest too. Then the decision was deferred for a year. A promise was made by management that it would look at options for where to put the animal care course—for example, maybe outside the building. A year later, the same decision was made. Not only that, but students had to wait until after the first Universities and Colleges Admissions Service deadline, which meant that students who were in that difficult position had less chance of going to other institutions in Scotland to continue their course. Problem after problem is happening, and the source is the management of SRUC.

The Convener: I will go to John Mason next, but among the questions there was a particular question for Professor Powell. Can you give that guarantee of the future of residential services at the Oatridge and Barony campuses? In 10 years' time, will they still be here?

Professor Powell: Our strategic plan is clear that we have a place-based approach, which I have referred to and which includes the colleges—Barony, Oatridge and Elmwood. That is laid out in our strategic plan. For us to do that, we have to look forward and we have to collaborate, and we will have to work together to achieve those outcomes, as we have been successfully doing to date.

The Convener: Does that include residential?

Professor Powell: Residential accommodation, yes, I think—

The Convener: Is that a guarantee from the principal that that continues for at least the next 10 years?

Professor Powell: Yes.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I am looking at the financial statements to start with, so I am probably aiming my questions at you, Professor Powell, but if anyone else wants to come in, they are welcome.

Reading your “Principal’s Report” in the financial statements, I note that it says:

"I am pleased to note a clear turnaround in our operating results during the year, supported by the careful implementation of our financial recovery plan."

At the same time, I note that, on page 30 of the accounts, it states that your reserves have fallen from £28 million in April 2024 to £15 million in July 2025, which is quite a big drop. Can you explain how those two tie together? Things have improved, but your reserves have fallen by £13 million.

Professor Powell: The reserves fell because of a combination of deficit and investments that were made in infrastructure and in areas of development.

John Mason: These are your running costs—your day-to-day costs—not capital investment. That would not affect the reserves, would it?

Professor Powell: Our cash at the moment is £11.1 million, which represents 41 days in cash reserves.

John Mason: With respect, I was not asking about the cash reserves. I suppose that where I am going with this is: your reserves fell from £28 million to £15 million and, if that happens another year, you will have practically no reserves. What if it happens again after that? Is the college financially sustainable? You say in your report you are turning it around, but that does not appear to be the case from the reserves.

Professor Powell: I think that, in terms of our going concern reports, we have unqualified going concern reports for the 10 years I have been at SRUC. Those have been audited, so I am happy to provide further evidence to the committee subsequently if that would be helpful.

John Mason: Okay—let me try another angle. You wrote the report; is that correct? When you say a clear turnaround—

Professor Powell: Which year are you referring to?

John Mason: July 2025. I said a year but it is 16 months, I realise, because you brought your accounts into line with the other colleges and universities. You note a clear turnaround in your operating results. Could you explain what the turnaround has been? How have you saved costs? How have you increased income?

Professor Powell: We have saved costs by managing our staff replacements and staff costs, and we have reduced our expenditure on travel and consumables. We have also reduced our capital spend. The main reduction has been in staffing levels—not replacing staff who are leaving—and in our expenditure.

That is completely in line with the financial recovery plan that we created in 2024. We have

moved from a deficit of £10.8 million to a deficit of £6.7 million, and that is over a 16-month period. It is important to remember that the year that you are referring to is a 16-month accounting period rather than a 12-month accounting period.

We continue to make good progress. We have projected this year to have a loss of £2.1 million, and we are working hard to reduce that even further and subsequently move into surplus.

John Mason: Can you say how, in the current year or the coming year, you are reducing that deficit? Is that further staff cuts or what?

Professor Powell: Going forward, there will be some staff reductions, but also we see opportunities for growth in revenue and across all of the areas—research, education and commercial revenue—and opportunities in international and TNE, or transnational education, offerings. We see opportunities for growth in those areas and having strong cost control in our operating budget, particularly on expenditure on travel and consumables and managing our staff costs carefully, which has been working successfully.

John Mason: I note that the number of staff paid over £100,000 has fallen from 11 to six, so I can see that savings are being made there. I am not from a farming or agricultural background. When you say you will be getting more commercial income, can you explain what that would be?

Professor Powell: One important element of SRUC's finances is the fact that it has a diverse set of income streams from education, research and commercial.

Our commercial income has a number of revenue streams that include vet services, laboratory, consultancy services and commercial offerings associated with development of skills and other services. It is a combination of services, knowledge exchange and a vet services programme.

John Mason: Okay—thanks. Some of my colleagues may want to follow up on some of that.

On investments, on page 6 of your accounts it states that £13.1 million was invested in transformational projects, and I understand that one of the big moves forward has been in veterinary training. I realise that I am coming at this from an accounting point of view, but I do not see that £13.1 million invested in fixed assets. It is not in buildings and things, is it? Can you tell us anything about the £13.1 million that was invested?

Professor Powell: Of the £13.1 million, approximately £4.5 million would be invested in the vet school. I would need to come back to you specifically on where the other investments were

made, and I am happy to do that promptly. I do not have that information in front of me.

John Mason: That is okay. Tell us about the vet school and the £4.5 million. Is that a building?

Professor Powell: The investments in the vet school include a clinical skills facility of £900,000, a lecture theatre of £600,000, investment of just short of £1 million with respect to Tulloch farm, £400,000 on a large animal handling facility and £1.7 million on a small animal clinic. A further £2 million on a post-mortem facility is pending approval from the board.

John Mason: Is that complete, or will there be more expenditure on that?

Professor Powell: One further item might be considered going forward, but that would be most of the investments that we are making in the vet school.

John Mason: Okay. The final point I was going to ask about may be a bit technical as well. The pension liability has quite an effect on your accounts, and I realise that that is not day-to-day normal expenditure. Can you tell us anything about why there is the liability for pensions?

Professor Powell: We have a number of pensions at SRUC. What I think you are referring to is not the operational position; it is the change in the valuation of the pensions that was approximately £6 million, which resulted in the £13 million overall comprehensive report.

John Mason: Is that your pension scheme, or is that jointly held?

Professor Powell: There are a number of pension schemes across SRUC. I cannot say specifically whether the £6 million is from one pension scheme, but I can come back to you on that.

John Mason: I will leave it at that.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Welcome to the committee, Professor Powell.

We have heard from others, including the community, about the devastating image of Elmwood, with a once proud building now boarded up. The farm has been sold, and the student accommodation is closed. You tried to sell the golf course, but that has not succeeded. It is now a shadow of what it used to be.

What really grates with people is that you have invested £12.5 million in Inverness, £21 million in Craibstone in Aberdeen, and then another £1 million at Craibstone, while the Edinburgh campus quad improvements amounted to £2 million to create a modern reception area, yet the building at Cupar is in the state that it is. You still claim that you have a regional place-based model. How can

you justify that when you are spending so much elsewhere and so little in Cupar?

10:15

Professor Powell: First, we are aware that we need to rebuild Cupar and that is why, with your support and intervention, we have Sir Ian Boyd looking at the opportunities for the future.

What we need to ensure going forward—and I think that we are in this position now—is that Elmwood is investable. Elmwood was losing money, and we needed to make sure that any investment that we made represented a return on that investment.

As with the previous intervention, as accountable officer I need to ensure that any investments we make will provide a return and ensure the financial sustainability of SRUC. I am optimistic that we can look at the future now, but to be able to look at the future we needed to get Elmwood to a point where we could invest into it.

Willie Rennie: There is no doubt Fife College was reckless 10 years ago when it pulled out and left you with a large building that was half empty—I get that. It was the drift for years that was frustrating for many people in the community, when all they saw was cut after cut and no plan for the future.

I am pleased now that we have Sir Ian Boyd, and I want to ask you a few more questions about his work in a minute. However, the issue for me is that it looks like the SRUC is more interested in the cities—Aberdeen, Inverness and Edinburgh—than it is in, say, Oatridge, where we have heard stories about the poor quality of student accommodation, or in Barony, where people feel left out. Auchincruive was sold off some years ago, and now Elmwood is facing that, too.

It looks as if you are more interested in grand projects in the cities than in the regional commitment, particularly in further education in places like Elmwood, Oatridge and elsewhere. Can you assure me that we have turned a corner and that you are committed to a true regional-based policy, not just to the cities?

Professor Powell: I can assure you, Mr Rennie. If we go back to the merger documents that essentially referred to Scotland's country colleges, which included Elmwood, Oatridge and Barony, the whole purpose of the creation of SRUC was to create an integrated model.

With respect to some of the lessons we can learn, first, it is wrong to say that Barony has not received investment. It has received the biggest investment in the south of Scotland—over £30 million. It has received £30 million of investment

from sources such as UKRI. The key element of that was working with South of Scotland Enterprise, working with the community and working with other partners to create an investable opportunity for the future.

The same applies to Aberdeen. The investments in Aberdeen are not only in the vet school. We also have the ONE SeedPod investment with Opportunity North East. That is an example of partnership working to support regional economic development.

When we talk about regional economic development, we talk about innovation and skills together. As you will know from your involvement in Gordon Brown's think tank, the big issue that is emerging is not about skills or innovation in isolation but how we bring the two together. For Elmwood, it will be important that we find ways to work with enterprise agencies and other private funding to support the development of the campus going forward. That will require us to be working in partnership.

Willie Rennie: Sir Ian Boyd is a significant figure and will make a welcome contribution. I am interested in whether his report will sit on the shelf, or will it have financial support behind it? How long will it take to produce? How big does he see Elmwood being at the end of the process? Do you have your own vision about where the process goes? I am interested in whether the report is tokenistic or will be substantial.

Professor Powell: I can assure you that the report is not tokenistic. It will be substantial, and I think someone of Sir Ian's stature would not have taken it on if that were not the case. The first point therefore is that it is not a token gesture. The report is about looking with an open mind at the future opportunities for Cupar and for Elmwood—and taking a different, radical and creative approach to examine that.

We know that in north-east Fife there are sources of comparative advantage—if we look at the potential of the horticulture industry, the potential of golf, and the potential of tourism. I do not know what Sir Ian is doing because he will be doing it independently of me, but he will be seeking views from you and other members of the community, including the Cupar community group that we referred to earlier.

Back to your substantive point, I am anticipating something quite radical. I do not anticipate the work coming up with specific financials, but it will look at new financial models to support developments in Cupar, which include potential investment from the private sector and elsewhere. Sir Ian will be well placed to provide views on that given his background, particularly with respect to UKRI.

In terms of timing, Sir Ian is working on the report now and we expect it to be available to our board by the end of March. The report, together with the board's findings, will be made public after that.

Willie Rennie: To be clear, the organisation has had extensive communication with Angela Anderson and the Elie and Earlsferry community council. The interest has been beyond Cupar—I wanted to make sure that that is—

Professor Powell: The board is happy for all parties to be engaged in this process, and I know Sir Ian will be reaching out accordingly.

Willie Rennie: I will turn to the veterinary course, which I know you are particularly proud of alongside the degree-awarding powers that you have for the institution.

There is concern in the British Veterinary Association about the support that is provided for veterinary courses at the main institutions—the traditional places where they are taught. There is the belief that the level of support that is provided is not enough to fund the courses, which is why those institutions rely so much on international students. International students can make up to half of the student complement—in fact, in Edinburgh, it is over half of the student complement—for that qualification.

You do not have that chance; you have few international students. I know that you are seeking to grow that, but it is currently 1 per cent of the total number of students at the institution. Where is the money coming from to fund the course? Is it funded completely from the students, or is additional funding coming from elsewhere in the institution?

Professor Powell: I am happy to provide further evidence to support the answer to that question, but let me make a start.

The concept of developing the vet school was initiated in 2019. It was opened in 2024, almost immediately after obtaining taught degree-awarding powers. The design of the new vet school involved an advisory board, which included the NFUS, the chief vet scientist and others, and the design of the vet school is critical to answering your question.

The design of the vet school has built on learning from Australia—from Charles Sturt University and James Cook University—and from North America, in particular Louisiana State University.

There are a couple of things are relevant—if I may continue for a moment, convener. First is the way in which we select the vet students. Coming from rural communities, they have a larger chance

of going back into those rural communities and staying in practice. The whole design is different.

The second aspect is that we will have between 60 or 70 students per year entering. Compared to the other vet schools, it is a small vet school, giving much more support to the individual students.

The third element is that we have not invested, and will not invest, in a large animal hospital, which is where a large part of the costs that we see in traditional vet schools are incurred. We will use clinical practices to support our vets in their training, so that they are better prepared to go back into the workplace.

The fourth element in terms of viability and sustainability is that we are training our vets alongside agriculturalists and alongside vet nurses, so that we have a diverse set of income streams going into the vet school to support the training of students. It is a different model to other traditional vet schools by design.

Willie Rennie: Is funding provided by the Scottish Funding Council for the qualification sufficient to run the course?

Professor Powell: The Funding Council is providing support for our students who then go on to study for the bachelor of veterinary medicine qualification. To be clear, the Funding Council has allowed us to take essentially just over two places for one vet medicine place. The number of HE places that we have available will become lower.

Willie Rennie: So there is no cross-subsidy: you are not taking money from elsewhere to fund the veterinary courses. There is no cross-subsidy from elsewhere.

Professor Powell: It depends on what you mean by cross-subsidy. The school of vet medicine and biosciences will be run based on income received from education and research—and, in fact, education and research to support its programme.

Willie Rennie: It is claimed that further education has suffered as a result of the drive to make the course a success. Are you saying that no money is coming from elsewhere that is undermining FE provision to make the course a success?

Professor Powell: The development of the vet school is not having a detrimental effect on our FE delivery. As I indicated at the outset, 43 per cent of the overall student places at SRUC are FE, and we intend to keep that proportionality going forward as the vet school develops.

Willie Rennie: So you do not see the need to significantly increase the number of international students to make the course a success.

Professor Powell: There has also been a question around the vet school accreditation, so let me put that to bed as well. Any new vet school is not accredited until it has gone through its first cohort of students, which will be in 2029, and that is when it would get accreditation. That applies to every other vet school. In terms of your question, for SRUC to train vets internationally, we would need to go through that accreditation process first.

Willie Rennie: Okay. You are very animated about degree qualifications, about the degree-awarding powers, about the veterinary course, and about the HE provision. I do not see you animated as much about the further education provision.

Staff feel that and they see it. They see how, when you speak, you speak passionately about all those things at the upper levels, as they would see it, whereas they feel left behind. Despite what you say about the proportion or the split between FE and HE, they feel as if you do not care about FE as much as you care about other levels.

Tell me why that is the wrong perception and what you are doing to make sure that SRUC seems a rounded institution that values all of its parts.

Professor Powell: You raised that point at the previous evidence session, Mr Rennie, and I take it seriously. I have thought carefully about it and how I can address it.

What gives me energy is not whether something is FE or HE, but the progression that SRUC's tertiary model provides. You will see, in the "Grow" booklet that I have here and in the note that has been sent to you with a link, a number of examples of where students have progressed from FE to HE and others who have stopped at a particular point and gone on to have rewarding careers.

I am here because I believe in the tertiary model. I believe in the parity of esteem between FE and HE. The whole rationale for obtaining degree-awarding powers was not just to award degrees; it was to be able to provide a rounded tertiary education system to support learners for the future and to support the needs of industry going forward.

10:30

Willie Rennie: Okay. I have one final question, convener, if that is okay. What lessons have you learned from the episode with the animal care unit closure about how you handled it and the decisions that you reached?

Professor Powell: That is a great question. The first aspect involves communication, and maybe this is an opportunity to address one point. The closure of the animal care facility and the vet school are not connected. The animal care facility

at Elmwood was a non-clinical facility. What we developed for the vet school was a clinical facility, which was critical to obtain accreditation. The important part of that relates to communication.

The second part is, again, related to communication. If you look at the original merger documentation that has been shared with you, you will see that two things were clear from the review that was conducted: there was an oversupply at FE of both horticulture and what is described as pet and domestic animal care. I have learned the importance of communication and the importance of engaging more with the community. That is a fair point and we will take that on board going forward.

However, I also think that we need to be decisive on these matters because we cannot sustain everything everywhere. We have to make some decisions. We have to do that in the best possible way that we can, with compassion and care, but they still need to be made.

Willie Rennie: Do you regret how it was all handled and the damage that it has clearly done to a lot of young people who saw the animal care unit as a lifeline? I have met many of the students and you have met them, too. They relied on that unit to give them a chance and you have taken that away from them. Do you regret that decision, the handling of it, and the impact on those young people?

Professor Powell: I do not regret the decision. The decision was the right decision to make. Inevitably, we can all learn from the way that we communicated that, but I do not regret the decision. The decision was absolutely the right decision to make to ensure that we have a financially sustainable Elmwood campus to be able to move forward and do the things that we have discussed. I have a huge amount of empathy for the individual students and parents that we met jointly together, but it was the right decision.

Willie Rennie: Okay. I think that they will disagree. I worry about those people and others in the community who will have to travel long distances to get a similar opportunity. I worry about them, but I have said enough, convener.

Professor Powell: I do as well. I am attempting to answer your questions as honestly and as directly as I can, but some issues about transport of students from Cupar to other parts of Fife and elsewhere in Scotland predate SRUC, as you well know from the Rocket Science report. The report looked at the Fife College exit and clearly demonstrated that the movement of students from Cupar to the south of Fife into Dunfermline and north into Angus and Dundee would not be reversed.

The Convener: Mr Hall, can I bring you in on veterinary medicine? Are any of you concerned that we do not have enough vets in Scotland? The vet school is now in its second year. When vets qualify in 2029, will that address those concerns or will there still be a shortage, particularly in large animal practice?

Jonnie Hall: It is a pertinent point. The capacity, if I can call it that, for veterinary services across Scotland, given Scotland's geography, is something of a concern. Right now, Tiree, for example, and various other places are struggling. I know that other west coast locations struggle as well in that respect. That is critical and of key concern.

Over recent years, however, the trend has been that a lot of vets qualifying have gone on to specialise in small animal practices, which are, dare I say, more lucrative. We have a significant capacity problem with large animal practices and their distribution across Scotland.

The other challenge, of course, came post-Brexit, because of the veterinary services required for abattoirs and so on. A lot of those posts were quite often filled by vets from the European Union. That flow of veterinary services has dried up significantly in recent years.

It is an issue and our members are concerned about it. Having the capacity to grow our own veterinary students and produce veterinary practitioners is important. If we are to future proof ourselves as a predominantly livestock-based agricultural sector, the role of veterinary services is critical. That goes right down to what might seem trivial things, such as signing off an animal health and welfare plan to complete a whole farm plan to unlock a support payment. That is critical. The distribution of veterinary services is as important as the veterinary service itself. Certain locations are struggling with that capacity.

As an organisation and as an industry more generally, we want to see efforts redoubled to ensure that we have the capacity to encourage, enable and deliver a thriving population of vets—I do not know what the collective noun is for vets, but there you go. Without being flippant about it, that is an important aspect of the viability of Scottish agriculture.

It is important not just in a purely clinical sense. The role of the vet in helping to drive efficiencies and improvements in productivity, welfare and all the other things that are so important going forward is key. In many ways, a vet is a partner in a farm business with regard to that informal advisory provision.

The Convener: Does the Government recognise that? Does it need to do more? Mr

Rennie was speaking about the more recognised institutions in Glasgow and Edinburgh having predominantly, in some cases, international students. If this trend continues, will we get to a tipping point where we simply do not have enough vets in Scotland to deal with animal welfare issues and to offer that advice? Let us hope that this does not happen, but if we have an outbreak of a very contagious disease, would we be able to respond to that at the moment, given the number of vets that we have in Scotland?

Jonnie Hall: I would not like to say whether we would be able to cope with a major disease outbreak. Clearly, the state veterinary service is critical in contingency planning, disease surveillance and all the rest of it. The role that is played by the likes of Sheila Voas, the chief veterinary officer for the Scottish Government, and her team is critical.

We all need to be acutely aware and conscious of the challenges of not having a sufficient veterinary service across Scotland. It is a risk to not just Scottish agriculture but our supply chains, particularly red meat, dairy, pigs, poultry and so on. How we might invest in capacity so that we have a pipeline of willing and able veterinary practitioners who work alongside our farmers and crofters should be very much on the Scottish Government's radar.

There are challenges. It goes back to the comments that have been made around the coverage of SRUC services and other services across Scotland, given our diverse topography and geography. Certain places have an abundance of vets and others have a dearth of vets. We need to think about how best we can address those issues.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. I will start with some of the themes that have previously been raised—in particular, the international comparison. When Professor Powell last appeared before the committee, he stated that there was a desire to have 1 per cent of the international student market, which is around 700 students. I am keen to understand how many international students were recruited this year.

Professor Powell: We have recruited approximately 80 this year and we have also attracted 92 rest-of-United Kingdom students.

Paul O'Kane: You recognise that 1 per cent figure that you had shared. Is that still the aspiration?

Professor Powell: The aspiration is for us to grow our student numbers and, relative to other universities in Scotland, the numbers would be small. Our plan is to balance the number of international students that would be studying in

Scotland with a transnational programme, where we would offer delivery of courses in other host countries. Our total student number is approximately 2,600, so 10 per cent of that—or 260 students—would be modest. The 1 per cent referred to the total number of international students in Scotland rather than to the number in our student body.

Paul O'Kane: Are you able to say from which countries, predominantly, you have recruited the 80 students?

Professor Powell: I can provide you with a comprehensive list of the countries, but a number of students have been coming from Pakistan, and some are from Nigeria. We have a broad range of students. I will provide you with the facts, but they come from approximately 24 countries, so it is quite a broad spread.

Paul O'Kane: That would be helpful. On the point that you made about internal recruitment from within the other nations of the United Kingdom, do you recognise the challenge in relation to Northern Ireland's rural colleges? The Greenmount campus in County Antrim is receiving £32 million for redevelopment, and Loughry campus in County Tyrone has a £43 million investment. Do you recognise that that investment—from the Northern Ireland Executive and those colleges in partnership—will be a challenge when you are trying to attract students who would normally come from our closest neighbours?

Professor Powell: We need to have a balanced portfolio and we need to be able to attract students from the rest of the UK and also internationally. We recognise the challenges that are taking place in the island of Ireland, including the development of some new vet schools, following the model that we have in Scotland and at SRUC.

What is important is the distinctiveness that SRUC offers and the capacity to learn in an environment where there is research, tertiary education from FE to HE, plus the opportunity to work with Scotland's largest consultancy organisation. From the point of view of students who are interested in agrifood and agri-environment, SRUC is an outstanding environment and will compete well with other institutions.

Paul O'Kane: Are you concerned? At the outset of this morning's evidence session, the convener mentioned those discussions with young farmers and NFU Scotland about the opportunities that exist for them elsewhere. With such a significant investment in Northern Ireland, which can be accessed fairly easily from Scotland, do you recognise that it will be a challenge to keep pace with the development there, particularly because

those colleges are focusing on food science, innovation, research and student accommodation? This morning, we have been hearing about challenges in relation to the disinvestment in campuses in Scotland.

Professor Powell: Modernising a curriculum to meet the needs of future learners is really important. That is one area that we are exploring by addressing and mitigating the challenges to which you refer, particularly around data and artificial intelligence. We need to address these important areas.

Across the globe, there will be competition for student places, and we need to position ourselves in the best way that we can. That is why we have been making some of the decisions that I have been referring to and have been challenged on, difficult as they are. We have to recognise that competition is taking place around Scotland and we need to remain competitive.

It will also be important that we build on the tertiary model, so that it allows students to come in at different entry points and leave at different exit points, and that we offer microcredentials and stackable microcredentials as well. We need to develop and modernise our educational offering, but, yes, without a doubt, there will be competition.

10:45

Paul O’Kane: Would anyone else on the panel like to make a contribution to this point? We heard about the island of Ireland, both north and south, and the investment that is being made there in rural education. The Government of Ireland has just announced €4.5 million for a distributed campus support fund to balance the regional issues that we have heard about this morning.

Should Scotland learn from that with regard to how we support the communities where there has been disinvestment from SRUC in campuses? I appreciate that it might be too little, too late, but it would be useful to get your sense about whether the Government should look across the water to what is happening in Ireland.

Garry Ross: Any investment in any campus, especially in rural locations, would be most welcome. A downturn or removal of provision from any community will have not only an educational impact, but an economic impact. The EIS would certainly welcome any other form of funding that could come forward to rejuvenate and help.

Paul O’Kane: That was very helpful.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): I will put a question directly to Garry Ross and Jeroen van Herk. To what extent are the interests of staff at SRUC being represented and heard in relation

to the recent and proposed changes, which we have heard about again, at SRUC? What are your opinions, please, on how to improve engagement between staff and the college?

Garry Ross: Thanks very much for that important question. We have heard evidence about the education and the students, but among staff at SRUC—I hear this especially among my members—morale is extremely low. Staff feel that investment, funding and so on have been centralised in Aberdeen and Edinburgh, and there is less across the spread of other campuses.

A key element of that is to do with not only removal of provision but on-going trade union issues, if I am honest. SRUC was established in 2011 and, so far, we still do not have a harmonised pay and grading system. We have four legacy institutions that joined together well over 13 years ago, with different wage structures and wage spines across the institutions. Barony, Oatridge, Elmwood and the SAC have legacy pay spines, but members of staff who joined SRUC post-merger also have pay spines. That culminated in a dispute in 2021, when staff took industrial action to try to rectify the situation. At the time, SRUC management and the EIS produced a memorandum of understanding that said that a pay and grading exercise would be undertaken. A pay implementation date of August 2022 was put on that. We are sitting with that pay and grading exercise still not having been completed; I understand that the grading exercise is sitting at only 60 per cent.

That situation is having a hugely detrimental effect on my members, because the post-merger SRUC pay spines sit substantially below those of other HE institutions and FE institutions. The pay of lecturing staff at SRUC has been eroded quite significantly over the past 10 years or so.

We can draw parallels with harmonisation in the further education sector in 2016-17. That involved 26 colleges and a national bargaining mechanism, so there was wide and varied interest in that pay harmonisation. That was completed more quickly than SRUC has managed to act between the dispute in 2021 and where we sit currently.

In the national FE pay spine for lecturing staff, an unpromoted lecturer at the top of the scale is sitting on just over £50,000, whereas, if someone were to join SRUC at the top of its unpromoted pay scale today, the figure would be £45,000. That is a £5,000 reduction in comparison with FE pay. In a typical higher education institution, the top of an unpromoted lecturer’s pay scale is £55,000; the SRUC figure is £10,000 less. That is hugely detrimental to staff.

The issue is not a purely tangible question of cash. What does that situation say to staff? We

would expect it to have a huge impact on recruitment and retention. If someone went to teach a similar course at an alternative institution, their pay would probably jump quite significantly, quite soon.

There have also been issues regarding staff progression. Do FE staff have adequate routes to progress their formal qualifications? Are they able to take a step into a degree programme at PhD level and go on to teach in higher education? Our members are saying that they do not see that that is the case; they do not think that the route or pathway into that is adequate. That is a real issue.

As I said, my members decided to cancel their strike action in 2021 on the understanding that the pay and grading exercise would be done with haste, but SRUC has failed to do that. Any time that we have asked when we can expect a completion date, we have never been given a date. That is a prevalent problem across SRUC.

The Convener: Given that SRUC's principal is with us, do you want to ask that question now?

Garry Ross: Yes. My members of the EIS—and, I imagine, those who are in Unison and Prospect—would love to know when the pay and grading exercise will be completed.

The Convener: Professor Powell?

Professor Powell: Thank you. I have a couple of points to make, if I may.

The Convener: I am sorry—can we get an answer to the question? I also want to hear from Mr van Herk.

Professor Powell: Do you want me to answer the question?

The Convener: Yes—the question about when the negotiations will be completed.

Professor Powell: I have a broader answer to give, because there are several elements of—

The Convener: Give us an answer to the question first, please.

Professor Powell: In order to answer the question, I have to provide evidence to address some of the statements that have been made.

First, in terms of union engagement, only two unions are present here today—not the three unions that are represented at SRUC. Secondly, we have union members on our board, who have been involved and engaged with all the decisions that have taken place. Thirdly, the harmonisation of terms and conditions was completed on 1 April 2025 with no detriment to staff.

In terms of pay and grading, an important point is that it is a complex process and we are 70 per cent of the way there. It is complex because we

have various job descriptions within any job title. I do not want to bore the committee with this but, to answer the question, we are committed to achieving an equitable and transparent pay and grading system that is fit for a tertiary education model that spans educational delivery from SCQF levels 4 to 12. Lecturers will deliver at different points in that tertiary model. Getting the right job description and parity of pay is our objective, and I commit to getting that achieved. We are 70 per cent of the way there and we continue to make progress.

We cannot do this in isolation; we need to be able to do it with engagement with the unions. As opposed to colleges, we are a higher education institution, and we do not get the support that colleges get for pay settlements.

The Convener: That was not an answer to the question. The question was about when—not about how or the circumstances behind this, but when.

Professor Powell: At this point, it is difficult to give a definitive answer as to when the date will be, because we are still working through all those processes, but we are making progress. We brought in additional help from an external agency to achieve this, but I cannot give a specific point at this time. I am happy to come back to the committee with further information, but we are progressing this as fast as we possibly can.

The Convener: Are you, though? It seems to have been going on for a long time. Do you have a target date? If you cannot tell us when the work will definitely be done by, do you have a period when you hope that it will be done?

Professor Powell: I can tell you that I hope that it will be done during 2026, but I cannot provide specific guarantees. I am happy to come back to you, convener; I understand you are pressing the matter. I want to emphasise the complexity that we need to address. There are legal issues and contractual issues around this. We are 70 per cent through the process. I hope that we will continue to make the best progress that we possibly can.

The Convener: Mr Ross, will your members be content that the exercise might be done this year?

Garry Ross: Sooner rather than later would be appreciated. As I have stressed, 26 regional colleges managed to harmonise to a national pay scale within a few years. The dispute that was taken out at SRUC had a line drawn under it at the tail end of 2021, and we are now into 2026 but we feel no further forward.

To come back on Mr Powell's point, I understand that the grading exercise is being progressed, but still no work is being done on what a pay spine might look like. That is concerning, given that the

pay at other HEIs far outstrips that of lecturing staff at SRUC.

The Convener: I am sorry, Mr van Herk—you had been about to respond to Mr Kidd earlier.

Jeroen van Herk: That is fine—no worries. Garry Ross said many things that I absolutely agree with. Morale at SRUC is spectacularly low. When I speak to our members, the big issue is indeed pay. People can go to other campuses and be paid £8,000 more. Not only that, but they will have less workload and less responsibility, because our departments are absolutely overstretched.

It is strange that we have all these projects and we have spent millions on creating all these beautiful buildings while at the same time we have all these buildings that are completely neglected. In the same way, we want to grow our student body and have more students, but we struggle in some areas to get staffing, because people can get a job elsewhere for way more money and with less responsibility. There are all these contradictions.

There are some very good examples. To be frank, I was surprised when I read the evidence that SRUC management provided to the committee about, for instance, apprentices. When I spoke to apprentices and work-based placement staff, they said that that area had grown by roughly 50 per cent in the past couple of years but, at the same time, lecturing staff constantly say that, if we really want to grow in that area, we need more staff. Lecturing staff say that they have asked senior management for more staffing, but they are simply not getting it. That has a big effect on SRUC; the issue is not only pay but the fact that we are completely understaffed. At the same time, management is saying that we need to have a cost-cutting exercise by cutting £5 million in spending on staffing. The world is upside down.

11:00

On the pay negotiations, we are now asking for restitution pay, because last year it was incredibly late when we were at the point of getting the pay deal negotiated. The deal was incredibly small compared with that for the rest of the sector. It is demoralising to see colleagues at other colleges, which are part of a national bargaining process, getting twice as much in their pay deal as we got. That is damaging for SRUC's reputation. It is really bad for staff morale, and staff are fed up with it, to be frank.

Bill Kidd: Before you come back in, Professor Powell, I have a question for Mr Ross and Mr van Herk. Negotiations have obviously has been going on for a while. Do you feel that there is advance and movement? Are you positive about how things

are developing on behalf of your staff's payment structures?

Jeroen van Herk: It is very slow. I am quite a new representative—I have been in place for less than half a year—but I have been to several pay negotiation meetings. The message that we get from management is simply, "There is not enough money. We cannot afford this." I really pressed, and Unison really pushed for getting the negotiations done faster than last time, which, again, took an incredibly long time. We have been told that we hope to reach a point around March or April, but I am not very optimistic about that.

Garry Ross: I will try to be as succinct as possible. There is a pay agreement for 2024-25, but that was reached only a few months ago, so we are already behind in pay uplift for staff and 2025-26 has not been agreed. SRUC sits outside the new National Joint Negotiating Committee agreement, which is a UK-wide pay body that agrees pay. I have not sat in on local negotiations, but I am aware that the initial offer of 2 per cent was rejected by staff, who were balloted to see whether they would take action to have that increased. SRUC came back and increased the offer by 0.25 per cent. Ultimately, the staff accepted that, but I think that that was because of the delay and the length of time that it would take to process that pay. We are now behind on 2025-26 negotiations. The key theme is that we are having to fight extremely hard for a relatively simple process and an understanding that the staff require a cost of living increase.

Bill Kidd: Professor Powell, you have heard from the trade union and staff side. You have said that there have been problems about ensuring financial improvement within SRUC. Is it possible that the staff side can be raised to the same level of importance as the development of buildings and so on, so that everyone can go forward together?

Professor Powell: The importance of staff is paramount. I would like to go back to some of the earlier comments to offer a view. The first is that I think that it is very important to get the evidence. I am happy to provide evidence to this committee about some of the comments that have been made. We have a joint negotiation and consultation committee that undertakes the negotiations. I do not think that this is the forum in which to undertake negotiations, particularly as we do not have one of our unions present here today. Further, not all of our staff are members of the union.

On the comments on morale, first, that is not what we see in our staff surveys. That is not what we see in retention; our retention rates are very high. Secondly, it is not what we see in the feedback that we get from leavers and through

other surveys. We will undertake a pulse survey this year and I will be happy to share that pulse survey with this committee.

I have one other point about the financial pressures that we are under. For SRUC, every 1 per cent increase in pay represents £0.75 million. The projected deficit this year of £2.1 million includes an allocation of 1.5 per cent for pay increases. Another increase in whatever it is would increase that deficit by at least £0.75 million cumulatively, and would have other implications for SRUC.

Bill Kidd: Thank you all very much indeed for being so open and honest. I am certain that the committee and everyone else is hoping that things can develop as positively as possible. Professor Powell, please could you let us have those figures, so that we can see how things are progressing.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): In parallel with Bill Kidd's line of questioning, I am conscious that we do not have anyone here who represents students, but various folk have talked about the efforts that you have made to get feedback from students, which is appreciated. Professor Powell, you have mentioned SRUC's strategic plan a couple of times. Could you talk us through how the perspective of students was taken into account in developing that plan?

Professor Powell: The strategic plan was first developed in 2023. Since 2023, there has been significant engagement with staff and students through the staff members that are on our board, through the staff-student association, through coffee mornings that we have been having with staff and students and other engagement. I can provide you with a copy of our engagement plan that covers staff and students and that will provide specific answers to your question. There has been internal and external consultation on the development of our strategic plan. Since 2023, we have also been developing a performance framework around our strategic plan, which is why it has taken a little longer to develop.

Ross Greer: In your personal position, how do you make sure that you engage directly with students? What efforts do you make to ensure that you are getting unfiltered, direct feedback and a broad perspective on what the student body is feeling?

Professor Powell: I meet with student association representatives once a month, together with my provost.

Ross Greer: What feedback have they been giving you over the last couple of years, through what has undoubtedly been a challenging period?

Professor Powell: Forgive me, Mr Greer. There is another mechanism that is important, which is a

student liaison forum, chaired by one of our board members, that operates across all the campuses.

The answer to your question is that not only I but the board get feedback from students through the governance arrangements that I just referred to. So there are two mechanisms for providing student feedback. In my engagement with students and through the co-presence of the student association, there are a couple of things that come through. One is, of course, the broad area of anxiety that we are hearing across the sector about finances. Within SRUC, we hear about the changes that have taken place with respect to the formation of schools, how we are addressing the formation of the schools and the importance of the delivery of our courses with respect to the schools. Those are two examples of student feedback.

There is broad feedback through the mechanisms that I described. It is taken very seriously by our board and significant time is devoted to it.

Ross Greer: We have heard already from others on the panel—in fact, the convener gave examples from young farmers and farmworkers who have spoken directly to him and other members. Did any of that resonate with you? We had a tangible example of students just wanting to get a hot shower when they have been working outdoors, but the facilities not making that possible. Does that resonate with you? Are you familiar with that feedback, or is this the first time that you are hearing it?

Professor Powell: We are very aware of the demand—if I have understood your question, and you may need to repeat it. Could you repeat it, please? I am not sure that I have understood your question.

Ross Greer: We have heard tangible examples this morning of clearly negative feedback from students and a clear desire from them for tangible improvements in their learning conditions—for example, being able to get a hot shower if they have been working outdoors. Have you heard such feedback directly, or is today the first time that you have heard about that?

Professor Powell: I am a little bit surprised, but I am very happy to take that on board and to explore that further. I am a little bit surprised because of the conversations that I am having with our lecturers who are teaching agriculture. I am a bit surprised, but I am very happy to take that back and follow up with the committee. The conversations that I am having with our lecturers are that some of the innovation that we are bringing into the curriculum is welcomed, and I think that the balance between practical training and the other aspects of training seems to be right.

I am very happy to explore that further and come back to you.

Ross Greer: Mr Hall, a lot of your members are recent former students. Indeed, you will engage all the time with those who are current students. Does the feedback that we have been talking about align with discussions that have? I mean the more informal feedback that, much as there is a high level of satisfaction with the quality of the learning and teaching that is provided by lecturers, there are also tangible frustrations from the students, whether about facilities or even the sense that their voice has not been heard in a lot of the strategic decision making over the last couple of years.

Jonnie Hall: I have not heard that directly at all. I do not get that feedback. We definitely, as an organisation, get feedback about the quality and practicality of the teaching experience and things like that, but that is very much individually. We do not canvass opinion on that from our members, or the members of our member families, if that makes sense. An awful lot of our members have been through what was originally the Scottish Agricultural College before it was SRUC. Many of our members are graduates of the SRUC that we know today. As I say, none of that feedback about the experience, if you like, comes back to us.

Our interest in how SRUC performs and delivers for the industry is around education. It is around practical applied research. It is also about the advisory services, which are so important if we are going to develop and deliver as an industry going forward. As I said earlier, we need an effective and functioning SRUC to help with that, but it is not all about SRUC. Many other agents are acting out there that are important to how Scottish agriculture evolves and moves forward and drives efficiency to deliver all the objectives that it is being asked to deliver. However, whether the showers at Oatridge are hot or cold, I could not possibly comment.

Ross Greer: Fair enough. Thank you. Garry and Jeroen, I know that you are not here to represent the students, but you have a lot of engagement. You have already mentioned some of the discussions that you have had. Is there anything else that you want to add, either about feedback that your members have had from students, or any that you have had directly?

Jeroen van Herk: I can say a couple of things. The reason why I know is that I work with the student association. The biggest survey that it conducts every year is called "speak week". That feedback is then collated, and Professor Powell should know about it because SRUC management replies to the feedback. From that, the student association and SRUC make commitments to improve situations. That information is out there and management should be aware of it.

11:15

I am here to represent our union, Unison, and our members, but I can speak about students. Yes, students do not always feel listened to. For instance, we are in a cost of living crisis and students have said year on year that the food in the catering service is too expensive. The company providing the catering is quite annoyed because the food prices continue to go up 10 per cent every year and students blame the company, but it is not the company that sets prices; it is SRUC management that has been putting the prices up 10 per cent year on year. That is very frustrating for students who are really struggling to make ends meet. A new food contract is going out in a couple of days' time.

Frankly, I worry for students, particularly international students who study in Craibstone. When they go to the food hall at Aberdeen university—I do not know whether you have been there—they find options of five different venues where they can eat. Then they come to SRUC, where the prices are very high and there is not much there. That is what I can say about students.

I will also comment on something that Jonnie Hall said. I recognise that our delivery in SRUC is amazing, but that is because our staff are amazing. That is another thing from the "speak week" data that we receive. We have this open question. We ask students:

"What would you like to improve in SRUC, but also what do you really love about SRUC?"

Nine out of 10 comments are students saying:

"I absolutely love my lectures; I absolutely love the staff that support me in my work."

Again, staff are really great but we simply do not get the pay to recognise that, and we are also understaffed. Sadly, rather than increasing staff, we now have staff being cut.

I have one more quick point to pick up, about international students, who were mentioned earlier and in the evidence that SRUC management has provided to the committee. While a focus on international students would be great if we had 1 per cent of all such students in Scotland—the SRUC evidence suggests that that would equate to 750 international students—the way that we went about getting in the 80 students that we have was incredibly chaotic. I do not say that just as opinion: I asked our international student staff how that went.

As a result, our forecast operating deficit is £2.1 million, as is written in the paper. Originally, it was meant to be £1 million. Again, why is that? We are being told that it is because we do not have students starting studies in January. Why do we not have January starts? It was so chaotic to have

September starts. Students came in late or missed induction. We did not have high enough staffing levels. I do not want to emphasise all those problems too much, but staff are absolutely exhausted and we are completely understaffed.

I want to put that message forward because, in all frankness, although you have given Professor Powell a good grilling, tomorrow it is back to business and all these problems will continue to occur. Staff are saying—I know this because many Unison members have come to me—"Great that there is a parliamentary committee hearing, but what will actually be done?" It is not like football. If you are a manager in football, you maybe manage your team for a couple of matches, but if you lose five times in a row you are sacked. In education, becoming a principal or a senior manager seems almost like a life peerage. I am sorry for my rant.

Ross Greer: That was very useful. At the risk of straying out of my agreed area of questioning, I would like to hear from Professor Powell on that point around international students. From what we have heard, it seems that revenue was lost because the administration of bringing in international students was not effective enough. Do you recognise that?

Professor Powell: I think that having international students coming to SRUC is a massive success story. I think that the cultural diversity that it brings to SRUC is huge. Specific staff have been hired to address some of the points that have been raised, and I am very happy to come back to the committee, or indeed for the committee to come and visit some of the international students and get an understanding of this first-hand—

Ross Greer: With respect, Professor Powell, I want to press on this point, because we all agree—

Professor Powell: I want to come back, if I may, on some of the other points after that.

Ross Greer: We all agree that bringing international students to Scotland has tremendous benefits, but what we have specifically just heard is that, because the administration of that was not effective enough, a £1 million deficit essentially became a £2 million deficit because revenue was lost. There was an opportunity to bring students in earlier and have more revenue, but that was not realised because the administration of the system was not effective enough. Do you recognise that, and is that a point of learning that is being taken on board?

Professor Powell: I recognise that the international students are vital for our revenue. I do not think that it is an administrative matter entirely within SRUC. The allocation of visas is an important factor, together with the timing of course

creation. There are issues that we need to—let me come back to the point. I recognise that we need to be streamlining our administrative process and procedures to optimise international student attraction and delivery. It is a fair comment, and it is something we will look at going forward.

The points that I wanted to make are in relation to your earlier questions. We have been working diligently with NFUS and industry to co-design courses for our students.

In terms of catering, we have been working on co-design with our co-presidents of the students union to support the delivery of catering facilities within the financial constraints that we face.

The Convener: On that point, Mr Hall, as a follow-up to the questions that Mr Greer was asking you, how involved is NFUS? You are the representative body of the farming community in Scotland, and Professor Powell has just said that you are involved in the co-design of courses. Is it as much as that? Are you co-designing SRUC courses?

Jonnie Hall: I am not.

The Convener: Is NFUS?

Jonnie Hall: There is reasonably close liaison, and I think that it is fair to say that Professor Powell and his SRUC colleagues, in different ways, use NFU Scotland members as sounding boards in respect of what would be appropriate, practical and relevant course material for a changing agricultural environment. It is only right that SRUC is open to input from the industry that it helps underpin.

I go back to the point that our interest is not only about the education side, it is about what is relevant applied research. We feed into things such as the strategic research programme our thoughts about the areas that Scottish Government funding should be going into, not only in SRUC but in other research institutes in Scotland. More applied research can then be rolled out in knowledge exchange and delivery on the ground at a pragmatic and practical scale.

It is right that the industry—via ourselves or others—has input into education and the applied research and advisory services that are provided. As I say, I am not personally involved in that, but we have an interest in skills education and the delivery of those things, as well as apprenticeships.

The Convener: When SRUC or the previous body, SAC, were closing farms and campuses, did the NFUS support that, oppose it or take a neutral position because it considers the college as an autonomous body?

Jonnie Hall: When Auchincruive and Craibstone were going through changes—as Elmwood is now—there was significant concern about that, particularly within those locations in Ayrshire and Aberdeenshire. At a local level, there has been significant discontent among our members about some of those changes. That is then translated in our thinking, and we have made it clear to the Government on several occasions that the industry cannot afford to step back and allow any such running down without proper investment in and funding for the proper, effective functioning of not only SRUC but the other research institutes as well because they enable Scottish agriculture to deliver what it is being asked to deliver. It would be foolhardy for us as an organisation to say, “Well, that is just the education system or the research sector. That does not matter to us.” It absolutely matters to us. We will be arguing with the Government on any platform anywhere to say that is needs to ensure that not only is the funding and the investment is in place, whether that is through commercial interests or the public sector, but that the education system is prioritised and that the research is appropriate, applicable and practical in its delivery.

The Convener: Before I turn to Miles Briggs, Professor Powell, you heard Mr van Herk's point and I have to say that as a football fan I liked his analogy. How do you respond to that? You and the senior leadership team have gone through a vote of no confidence, which you lost. However, “Nothing changes” is the response we have heard from your staff, knowing that you and others were before the committee today. What will the difference be?

Professor Powell: Could you elaborate on that question, convener?

The Convener: Well, is it the case that it is Wayne Powell and the senior management's way, and dissent from the staff is unfortunate but just something that you are going to get? Do you reflect on the fact that there are community organisations—some in the gallery today—that are very against the plans that you have taken forward as principal? There are staff concerns and we know that there are also student concerns and the wider industry concerns that I articulated at the start. How do you respond to those people? Do you say that you hear them but nothing changes? What is the future for Wayne Powell? What is the long-term future for you as principal, given that staff who have spoken to their representatives who have come to this meeting think that nothing will change and tomorrow it will all go back to normal?

Professor Powell: First of all, I do listen. The second thing is that difficult decisions are sometimes unpopular. That does not make them

wrong. However, I fundamentally believe in listening; I listen and take on board people's views.

On some of the points that were raised, we have two Fife farmers on our board, so we have local understanding of what is going on. I certainly subscribe to the view that we should engage with local communities and will continue to do so. However, we also have to be in a position where we sustain SRUC going forward. We have to ensure its financial sustainability and remain true to the mission that we started in 2012 when the merger took place.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I have a couple of questions. The first question is about the external support that has been provided by the Scottish Funding Council to take forward some of the changes. Could you outline what that has looked like?

Professor Powell: We have a very productive relationship with the Scottish Funding Council. We have received excellent financial support from the Scottish Funding Council in the form of a £5 million advance, and in support for repayments of transaction loans. We also have had support from the Scottish Funding Council in utilising our student numbers to support new vet entrants into our new vet school. Going forward from yesterday's budget, we will continue to engage with the Funding Council on supporting SRUC, including in respect of capital investment and further investment in supporting our student numbers.

Miles Briggs: Looking specifically at the cross-sector vision, what plans are being developed around what is needed in our rural communities in respect of workforce planning? What does that look like? I will bring you in, Professor Powell, and then Mr Hall. It feels as though there is a disconnect between the skills that we have shortages in and where the college is focused on meeting that skills gap at this moment. What are you doing to try to bridge that gap, given what is often raised in Parliament around those current key sector skill shortages across the country?

11:30

Professor Powell: Following on from the Withers review and the report that came out about agile skills for a changing economy, we are very much involved in engagement with industry and business to understand what the needs are going forward, and ensuring that our courses are tailored to that. We have also engaged in supporting work-based learning so that we provide opportunities for students to undertake the equivalent of an apprenticeship, and in developing microcredentials to support business needs. I am also involved in sharing interface to ensure that we

have a good understanding of the connection of businesses into colleges and universities more generally.

Miles Briggs: Specifically, can you outline any work that the college has taken forward to address the current shortage of farriers across the country? It is an important issue that has been raised with me. I chair a cross-party group on horseracing and bloodstock industries here in the Parliament, and the shortage has become a really important issue. Currently, there are 185 registered farriers across the country; only six training apprenticeships are currently in place. Quite an obvious crisis is building. What is the college's response to that?

Professor Powell: The college response to what? I am sorry, I am having difficulty hearing you.

Miles Briggs: In delivering farrier training opportunities.

Professor Powell: The barriers to training opportunities—

Jonnie Hall: Farriers: it is to do with horses.

Professor Powell: Thank you.

We would love to be able to support the development of farriers, and we have the facilities and infrastructure to do that at Oatridge. However, we need the funding to be able to develop that. I would be happy to pick that up with you separately. It is an area that one of my colleagues is actively engaged in.

Miles Briggs: At present, nowhere in Scotland is accredited to run that course. I would have thought that SRUC would have been doing work, years ago, to become accredited for that. That is a great opportunity and the great crisis that is building in equine health should be a priority. Scottish Government and yourselves should be making that a priority. There has been very little progress. Along with the cross-party group, I have written a number of letters on the topic. There does not seem to be the necessary leadership. That is concerning, because most members of the committee look to SRUC to do that work for our rural and agricultural communities. It does not seem to be progressing at any pace. Would you take on board that criticism?

Professor Powell: I am very happy to pick that up with you personally and take that on board. I am very happy to ensure that we follow that up.

Miles Briggs: I mentioned vision because I think that scoping that opportunity and the jobs of tomorrow for our rural communities should be a key part of what you are doing. What is your vision for the organisation?

Professor Powell: The vision—not mine but SRUC's—is to be a model for the delivery of tertiary education to support Scotland's rural economy, bringing together innovation, skills and enterprise to support the rural economy, which is critical for Scotland, and maximising the full potential of Scotland's natural capital, which underpins most of Scotland's iconic industries including food, agriculture, aquaculture and other areas. However, we will not do that in isolation; we will do it through collaboration.

Miles Briggs: On the issue of inclusion, we have received a number of communications specifically around learners who have been relying on local provision, perhaps because they cannot travel independently and benefit from that supported local infrastructure. Is that part of your vision? Is moving learning online your offering for those individuals? There is great concern about what that will actually mean in the future. All members of the committee have visited different institutions and we often hear that travel is a key barrier to someone accessing a course.

Professor Powell: Being able to provide local provision is really important and we will continue to do that. One area that we are interested in exploring is the 24 consultancy offices that we have across Scotland. We are considering how well we can adapt those to provide local provision in an innovative manner. Local provision is an issue, but we also need to address the needs of future learners and the needs of industry and the economy to support the skills agenda.

Miles Briggs: I will bring you in, Mr Hall. What is your impression of skills planning, given what I have outlined specifically around farriers, and is SRUC meeting or not meeting broader industry needs?

Jonnie Hall: I am not going to single out SRUC, because I think that there is a bigger issue with skills planning, auditing and understanding what we require for not only the agricultural sector but the wider rural economy and the land-based sector, which is becoming more diverse, with different income streams. There absolutely needs to be better understanding of and insight into what skills and capabilities we need to drive businesses in that sector forward. There is no doubt about that, and NFU Scotland will want to play a full part.

A bigger question, which is relevant to the committee, is where that journey begins—in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects in the school curriculum. I know that this is a cliché, but how do we create the pipeline and attract and enable younger people to come into not only the agricultural sector but the wider rural economy, with all the different

businesses that make up rural Scotland these days?

That is a bigger question; there is a bigger task than simply reviewing where SRUC is and how it can deliver. Clearly, SRUC will have a major part to play in the delivery side; however, understanding the demand and needs of the sector is the first port of call. That piece of work is way overdue.

Miles Briggs: Do you think that the Scottish Government understands that and is taking forward work in that space or is there a disconnect? We hear consistently about shortages across all sectors, which is a real concern for the economy, but also that institutions are not managing. The credits system has often been put forward by the college sector as the reason why it does not have the flexibility to put on additional courses. However, I do not see who is leading the work to make sure that shortages are filled over time.

Jonnie Hall: I do not see a particular issue with the Scottish Government, because I think that it has identified that one of the big challenges for the agricultural industry is how you attract and retain people by providing career pathways within it. The Scottish Government drives initiatives such as the farming opportunities for new entrants programme, and there is the work on apprenticeships and the debate about how we make agriculture an attractive career option for younger people. That is partly a responsibility for us. How do we attract individuals not only to be farmers but to have careers within all the allied industries, trades and professions that are so important to making sure that agriculture in Scotland is professional and can deliver what it is being asked to do? As I have said a number of times this morning, that is really important.

Understanding where we are today is also important. Some of the supply issues are not necessarily in the gift of NFUS, SRUC, the Scottish Government or the Scottish Parliament. Some of the challenges that we have faced in recent years are a consequence of events such as Brexit and relate to the movement of people and the ability and willingness of seasonal and permanent workers. That is a much bigger debate; nevertheless we need people to be skilled, competent, able and willing. There is a role for Government to make sure that we can provide those opportunities.

Miles Briggs: Does anyone else on the panel want to come in on any of those questions?

Garry Ross: The only additional point that I want to make is that educational institutions should also take into account educational requirement. There is obviously a huge need for both colleges

and universities to produce students who are ready for the workplace. However, there also has to be an adequate spread of education provision for those who want to learn something. That should not merely be driven by industry; that leads to the broader issue of marketisation and the potential loss of courses, not only at SRUC but across education in its entirety. That is because if subjects are not seen to feed into workplaces or industry, they are no longer viable and they are then lost. That is not an SRUC-specific thing. There needs to be a real understanding and review of why universities and colleges are there. They are there to educate people, not only for work purposes but in an on-going way throughout their lives, allowing them to pursue interests that they might have.

Miles Briggs: Thanks for that. We heard that last night at the EIS Further Education Lecturers Association event here in the Parliament. I am grateful for your input to that as well.

The Convener: There are just a couple of things before we finish up. Professor Powell, we heard earlier about an email that you sent saying that you have to make £5 million of staffing cuts. Is that correct?

Professor Powell: What was that, sorry?

The Convener: You sent an email to all staff about £5 million of staffing cuts. Is that correct? Mr van Herk?

Jeroen van Herk: Emails were sent; either every month or every two months there is a “principal update”, as I believe they are called. One thing mentioned in there was that £5 million had to be saved in staff costs—

either not renewing positions or limiting recruits. I believe that the message was something along the lines that the budget for staffing was, I believe, £65 million and had become £50 million. I believe that was the line.

The Convener: Did you say that it had become or that it had to become?

Jeroen van Herk: It had to reduce by £5 million, so it therefore had to become £60 million, from £65 million. I believe it was in that region.

Professor Powell: In terms of the financial recovery plan, it is clear that we need to reduce our staff costs as a proportion of our total income. I am afraid that I do not have that email in front of me. I am happy to come back to you on that, but I suspect that it was to do with delivering on a financial recovery plan by reducing our staff costs. Largely, we achieved that through not replacing staff who had left the organisation.

The Convener: The £5 million figure is correct. You will remember how much you had to save.

Professor Powell: We had to save in terms of our financial recovery plan. The financial recovery plan was set to save in excess of £5 million, but that would be over a number of years.

The Convener: If you were emailing all staff and you had a figure, you will be able to recall that. Was it £5 million or about £5 million? Does that sound right? It was going to result in your organisation employing fewer people, to the tune of a cost of £5 million?

Professor Powell: I would like to understand when that email was sent.

The Convener: Have there been significant staffing reductions, or are there projected to be staffing reductions in the future, of the level of around £5 million?

Professor Powell: Our staff reduction that we have been implementing during the financial recovery plan has reduced staff numbers by between 70 and 80 members of staff, so that would represent about a £4 million to £5 million reduction in staff costs. Largely, those would have been achieved through non-replacement of staff leaving the organisation and not filling those replacement posts.

11:45

The Convener: Is that the end of the reductions in staffing, in terms of a recruitment freeze or looking for people to leave the organisation and not replacing them et cetera?

Professor Powell: We are doing our best. During the past six years we have not made any compulsory redundancies at SRUC and will endeavour to continue with that. However, in the light of the conversations that you have heard this morning about pay settlements and other pressures on the system, I cannot provide guarantees on what staff reductions would look like. Our goal is to maintain the staff complement that we have, but we are under a lot of pressure in terms of achieving financial sustainability.

The Convener: We have heard a lot of unhappiness from unions representing staff about pay and conditions. Are you happy with your own salary and conditions?

Professor Powell: My salary is £214,000.

The Convener: That is why I was asking if you are happy with it.

Professor Powell: My salary is set by my board on the recommendation of the remuneration and appointments committee. It is for the role, and I have not sought an increase in my salary or received any increases other than the percentage increases that the other staff have received.

The Convener: You have not received increases, but I am still asking, are you happy with it? Is it a generous salary? Is it one that you think should be higher? Is it exactly right, or should it be lower?

Professor Powell: I think it is a generous salary. I am aware of the optics of this.

The Convener: So, it is too high?

Professor Powell: I did not say that.

The Convener: You said that it is generous and you are aware of the optics. What did you mean by those very specific words that you chose there?

Professor Powell: My salary is £214,000 per annum. It is set by the board. I am privileged to be leading an organisation of national significance and the level of salary is set by my board.

The Convener: Mr van Herk—and this is perhaps for Mr Ross, too—your question was, what happens tomorrow after the session today? We will go into private session to discuss the evidence that we have received today. What do you think your members would like to see happen tomorrow and in the future? Having brought these issues to Parliament, largely because of concerns, which have been in the public domain, from community groups, local MSPs and others, and current and former staff and students, what do you think needs to happen going forward after this session?

Jeroen van Herk: Having evidence sessions such as this one is very good, and given the financial situation that we are in, I hope that there may be another of these meetings at some point. I cannot really speculate on outcomes. It is not that our membership has made particular demands; it was more an open question that they asked me. I think that our membership is quite happy with our union, but again, the big question that they ask is, what can you do to create change? I would say that Unison is quite a good union, particularly in Scotland. We are quite strong. Again, however, we are limited in what we can achieve in terms of management. I do not know if I can give a better answer than that.

The Convener: No, I think that you have articulated that well. Mr Ross?

Garry Ross: Our membership, first and foremost, is looking to draw a line under any form of pay and grading and pay aspects that are outstanding at SRUC. That would allow them to focus better on what they are there to do in their highly skilled roles as educators. Coming out of this is the need to ensure that there is an equilibrium in further education provision across each of the campuses, and a focus on the campuses that have seen an erosion of investment

and support. Those are the key things that EIS members would be expecting. They only seek parity with their colleagues across the higher education sector and the opportunity to progress their own careers to the betterment of their students.

The Convener: Mr Hall, is NFU Scotland looking to continue the close working and the development of future farmers, farm workers and crofters going forward?

Jonnie Hall: Absolutely. As I have said a number of times, critical to the longevity of the Scottish agricultural industry is having not only a pipeline of skilled and able individuals but the applied research and advisory services that SRUC and others provide.

The Convener: Professor Powell, do you have any final comments about what we have discussed today and the future?

Professor Powell: I will respond in writing to many of the points that have been raised. In particular, on your opening comment regarding next-generation agricultural students, I will come back to you specifically with an update on the proposed visit. On the point on FE across all campuses, that already exists. As one further point about new entrants, we did initiate new entrants into dairy farming in the south of Scotland, and that was welcomed and launched by the agricultural minister.

The Convener: I hope that you might welcome old entrants, because I am looking for a job in a few months' time and I might go back to my former life milking cows—you never know.

Thank you all very much for your time today, for your evidence, both written in advance and in your answers to questions today. It is much appreciated by the committee. I will now suspend the meeting to allow the committee to move into private session to consider our final agenda item.

11:51

Meeting continued in private until 12:08.

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