OFFICIAL REPORT
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Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 28 January 2026

Session 6

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
4th 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:

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green) (Committee Substitute)
Dan Cutts (University and College Union)
Melissa D'Ascenzio (University and College Union)
Stewart Forrester (Unite the Union)
Sophia Woodman (University and College Union)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 28 January 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Universities

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning, and welcome to the fourth meeting in 2026 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. The first item on our agenda is an evidence session with trade union representatives from four of our universities. I welcome Dan Cutts, the joint chair of the University of Aberdeen University and College Union branch; Melissa D'Ascenzio, the joint president of the University of Dundee UCU branch; Sophia Woodman, the president of the University of Edinburgh UCU branch; and Stewart Forrester, a Unite senior representative at the University of Strathclyde. Thank you for the written evidence that you have submitted, which has been circulated to committee members.

This is quite a large panel, and we are a large committee, so if you feel that a question has already been answered or that you have nothing to contribute, do not feel obliged to answer every question. However, if you have something to say, please get involved by indicating that you want to come in. There might also be specific questions for specific witnesses.

Thank you not only for your correspondence in the run-up to this evidence session but for your engagement with the committee over many months and years. The committee is keen to hear your representations on behalf of your members. We have heard from principals and senior management from a number of the universities, but we are extremely keen to hear your views and opinions on what is going on in your individual universities and in the university sector more generally.

I will kick off the questioning. What is the current feeling at your individual university, given the financial plight and that jobs are under threat? What is morale like among staff and students? Give us a picture of where things are just now. I will bring in Mr Cutts first.

Dan Cutts (University and College Union): Since 2013, there has been a significant change in how things have been operating. Many of you will be aware of the situation with modern languages. Ever since then, voluntary severance and enhanced retirement schemes, along with dwindling staff numbers, have been part of the picture. From October 2023 to October 2025, there was a 23 per cent reduction in overall staff, which has had significant workload implications for everyone involved. There are significant concerns about how we can continue to deliver a good service for students and provide them with the best experience.

The position is very challenging, but we are working harder than ever. A 1.4 per cent pay rise for those at the University of Aberdeen was deferred for some time, but it eventually came through, although remuneration is not quite at the level that people would like it to be. The position is extremely challenging, and it seems to be continuous—we do not see where this will end. I think that that will do for an introduction.

Melissa D'Ascenzio (University and College Union): I thank the committee for inviting us here.

The situation at the University of Dundee is extremely difficult. Evidence of that comes from a couple of recent listening exercises and wellbeing surveys that the university conducted with all staff and that the UCU conducted with its members. Those listening exercises and wellbeing surveys paint a dramatic picture. Between 60 and 70 per cent of respondents to the university's listening exercise reported a psychological or physical impact from the crisis, including anxiety, difficulty sleeping and physical symptoms such as palpitations and the exacerbation of pre-existing conditions. In our survey, at least 65 per cent of respondents reported that the increase in their workload had had an impact on their personal life, with staff feeling as though their lives are on hold. It transpires from those surveys that staff feel completely abandoned from a career perspective. At the same time, they feel unable to make life decisions, such as the decision to create a family, or they might be worried about their mortgage.

As my colleague from Aberdeen said, it feels as though there is no end to this.

The crisis at the university has been going on since November 2024, and staff are on their knees. In the meantime, many of our colleagues have left, not just through the voluntary severance scheme, but through retirement and career and job changes. Colleagues have moved on and others have had to pick up their workload. Like our colleagues in Aberdeen, we are very worried about the student experience that we can offer and about whether we will be able to continue to provide the suite of courses and programmes that we currently offer.

We are in an unfortunate situation, which has been exacerbated by the fact that, in 2024, the university decided to change the way in which it measured workload. In September 2024, we

logged a failure to agree that with the university. At the time, we told the university that we were logging a failure to agree that change because we felt that the new workload allocation model failed to indicate how roles would be accounted for in terms of time and effort, so it would not produce sufficient safeguards against exploitation and breaches of the working time regulation.

Unfortunately, that is the situation that we find ourselves in.

Sophia Woodman (University and College Union): I, too, thank the committee for taking these issues seriously. I point out that I am representing not only my own union, but the joint unions at the University of Edinburgh, which have written to the committee on a number of occasions to express serious concerns.

The University of Edinburgh is a winner in the marketised higher education system, so, in a sense, it is the last institution that should be doing this kind of thing, but we are seeing issues that are very similar to those that the other union reps have outlined. There is a real fear that people will lose their jobs. Almost 800 staff have gone in the past year, and there are more job cuts to come. The joint unions believe that those cuts are unnecessary and unfair, and that the financial crisis at Edinburgh is really due to serious mismanagement, especially excessive capital spending.

We are seeing similar patterns of ballooning workloads. When the joint unions did an all-staff survey—in other words, a survey that did not cover only union members but was open to all staff—in 2024, before the cuts started to bite, we found that about 75 per cent of staff were already overworking at that point. The problem has got much worse. People are working beyond their contracted hours, the work speed has gone up for professional services and there are gaps in professional service teams that mean that people are having to take on additional work from colleagues who have left.

Obviously, that is having a serious impact on what we do for our students and on our research. Student experience funds have evaporated due to the cuts. Funding for tutors, who are our most casualised staff, has shrunk, which means that there are larger tutorial classes and less attention in those classes. Course and programme offerings are being eliminated, and research funding has been cut to the bone. We think that that will impact the quality of research and teaching long into the future.

Staff are adamantly opposed to the cuts. In that context, the unions are representing not only their members, but all staff. Universities are at a crisis point, and, in our view, it need not be that way.

Stewart Forrester (Unite the Union): At my university, the University of Strathclyde, this time last year, we were in dispute over our pension. The university took our Strathclyde pension off us—it got £85 million off us by taking our pension. It was that desperate to get our pension that it gave us £6,000 each. It started off at £500 each but ended up giving us £6,000 each and four days holiday. It also actually paid us for having two weeks on strike. That is how desperately the university needed our money to make it secure. It also gave us guarantees that that money would make the university secure going forward.

Six months down the line, we are back in dispute because the university is now just tapping people on the shoulder and saying, “Time to leave. We need the money back.” My university has to save £35 million over two years: £20 million this year and £15 million next year. It has £12.5 million just now and it is looking for another £8 million by the end of this year. We are now going through a second phase and we are being told that, out of 68 people, the university is looking for another 24 people to go, to save money again. The three unions at the university have now brought up the issue that workload is unacceptable.

It looks as though management is mostly picking on people with long-term sickness or a disability. The unions are now looking into that to see whether they can prove that against the university because if management has the right to pick who it wants and we do not get the option of voluntary severance, that is totally unacceptable. My university has £210 million in the bank and it is still looking for money.

I need to ask this committee a question, if you do not mind. My university had to pay £29 million for Scottish students this year. The Scottish Government gave us £117 million tax free, but we then had to find £29 million to educate those students. I want to know why my university and other universities have to pay that money. We are losing jobs through this, whereas if you gave us the money that we deserved—from the £29 million—we would not be in this situation.

I am on the joint negotiating committee for higher education staff, representing 69 universities in Britain for pay, terms and conditions. I honestly believe that the universities are going through a crisis just now because of a lack of funds from Government and because of what is happening in education.

At my university, since Jim McDonald left, people have been getting a tap on the shoulder and they are not getting told what they should be getting told, and then the university is giving them only 30 days to come up with why they should keep their jobs. Over Christmas, I had four people

who work in estates—plant managers—who were told that their jobs were going. One of them left. One of them said, “Okay, I’ll go for another job, and I’ll go through the voluntary redundancy system”. Over Christmas, the university then found that it actually needed them. They were put through stress for four weeks over Christmas, with the university saying, “Your job’s going,” and then the university said, “We need you”. It is a total and absolute shambles at my university right now.

The university is now listening to us because all three unions have put a grievance in against it because of the way that it set things up, what it was doing and how it went about its business. At this stage, I think that the university should be taken to task. My feeling is that it has turned into a business rather than being a university.

The Convener: Thank you all very much. That was a good overview because it was helpful, but the picture that you are painting of what is happening on the ground is not good.

Ms Woodman, you said that the financial pressures are down to serious mismanagement. Mr Forrester, you suggested that Government funding is not sufficient. Where does the blame lie here? Is it about the level of funding that universities are getting? Is it about the management on the ground? This is not just about one or two universities. We have four universities represented here, but you also represent universities across the country where financial pressures are being articulated. Who is to blame? Is it a combination of a number of things?

Also, why are things reaching such a pinnacle now in terms of the problems and the number of job losses that we have already seen through voluntary redundancy and which are being anticipated?

Stewart Forrester: It is a combination. The university relied on foreign students. That has now been taken away from most universities. Universities then started building shiny new buildings for the students’ experience, which cost a fortune.

There has been a bit of bad management, as well, and a major lack of funding from both the Scottish and United Kingdom Governments. It is the fault of both factors: there has been bad management from putting money in the wrong place and the lack of foreign students is now causing a massive problem for lots of universities, because they have relied on them.

09:45

Melissa D’Ascenzio: I of course recognise that funding for universities has gone down in real terms over the past 10 years. It is important to note that, in the case of my institution, the University of Dundee, the crisis developed just after two or three years that were extremely successful in terms of student recruitment. The University of Dundee brought in about £70 million in student fees in 2020-21; for the following three years, it brought in between £95 million and £115 million a year in fees. On top of that, it sold shares for £40 million.

The university should therefore have been able to absorb any shock from the market, but it could not. The reason why it was not able to do so was because of financial mismanagement, as is clearly highlighted in the Gillies report. In particular, the Gillies report notes that capital expenditure at the university continued at unsustainable levels throughout the period that the university knew that it had an operational deficit and that a £43 million spend in capital expenditure in the 2023-24 financial year was backed by cash reserves. In effect, the leadership of our university was financing shiny new buildings or capital expenditure refurbishment with cash. You could give those people in leadership a lot more money, but where would it be spent? Would it go towards the student experience and towards staff, or would it go into shiny new buildings and new offices?

If you look at the experience of the University of Dundee, you see that there was very poor management of big transformation projects. The Gillies report shows that the universities had invested about £20 million in intangible assets since 2016 and that about £8 million of those investments had been written off for systems that never went live.

In a way, our principals and vice-chancellors are trying to have their cake and eat it. They would like more money from the Scottish or UK Governments, but, at the same time, they want no oversight. As unions, we would say that the sector possibly does need more money in order to be sustainable, but that there must be very clear oversight and scrutiny of where that money is spent.

Dan Cutts: I will build on what my colleague from Dundee said. On the situation at the University of Aberdeen, I feel that the way in which the funding model has operated has led the institution to take more risk. The overreliance on international students has put a lot of things beyond the institution’s control and, when there is a dip in numbers, it is exposed to the shock.

Obviously, we would love to see more money for the sector, but I completely agree that that money should probably not be used for things such as new buildings. However, that being said, my Aberdeen trade union colleagues from Unison and Unite would like me to raise the fact that the university is more than £100 million behind on

repairs for buildings. The university now has operations in Mumbai, which I will be neutral about; I will not say much more on that. We also have a new science teaching hub. What is happening at the institution at home is a key issue; if the buildings are not maintained correctly, that impacts the student experience and staff working conditions, so we need to look at that.

Sophia Woodman: The University of Edinburgh has never been in deficit, and it continues to make a large surplus, although it depends how that is calculated. If we measure it by EBITDA—I guess that the committee is already familiar with that term, which means earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation—the university had a £96 million surplus last year.

Management is now using other calculations that make the surplus much smaller. Student numbers and tuition fees remain at an all-time high. Likewise, with research income, research grants have been rising. The university has an enormous endowment and investment fund with net assets of £3.1 billion, lots of which is potentially usable cash rather than being tied up.

The problem at Edinburgh is poor governance. We see very similar problems to the ones identified in the Gillies report. University autonomy should not mean free rein for an unaccountable group of managers. The senate, which is the body that is supposed to oversee the teaching and research and the academic mission of the university, as a governance body, voted that it had no confidence in management's financial proposals, because of their impact on the core mission of the university. That was in May last year, and we have heard no response from management or the university court.

The problem is a lack of proper oversight by the university court. It does not look into the finance data that it is given by management or the analysis of those finances by management. The court does not look through the homework of the senior leadership. That is an acute problem and one that I think Government could address.

We know that funding is an issue everywhere, and higher education needs to be more of a priority. I am sure that you have all heard from constituents, including students, who tell you that. There is unaccountable management. If it were more transparent and if there were more staff and students on governing bodies, that would make an important difference.

I will conclude by giving you one figure. Last year, when the cuts were already under way, Edinburgh spent £200 million on capital expenditure. In what world is that an acceptable priority for a university that is a charity with a core mission of research and teaching?

The Convener: I realise that my questions have been quite open, which is why we have had good and comprehensive answers, but we will have to tighten things a bit to get round all committee members.

I have a final question for the moment. What is the level of trust between unions and university management? What is the level of meaningful engagement? When we have principals, vice-chancellors and other senior managers in front of the committee, they say that they regularly engage with and listen to unions—some have written to us this week to say that. Does it feel as if you are being listened to, or are we being fobbed off with such answers?

Dan Cutts: Thank you for asking that question, as that has been a significant problem for us in Aberdeen. When the fair work principles were introduced, the union really valued them and we were excited that things would get better, especially through the principle on effective voice—we really welcomed that. However, since we signed the document, we have had very little engagement with the senior management team. We felt that we had to sign it, as that was associated with access to funding, and we did not want to stop that happening. However, since then, there have been a number of issues.

Since then, all three unions—UCU, Unite and Unison—have had issues engaging with the management. It relates directly to the adapting for continued success programme of change that is under way at the institution. Plans for that change will go to the court on 18 February, but we have not had any engagement on it, even though management is talking about completely reshaping the institution.

It is not only the unions that have not had engagement on the plan; the university senate has not either. We have not been made aware of management's plans, its reasoning for the proposed changes or how many savings it could make. It also refuses to rule out compulsory redundancies, which makes us suspicious. Why can it not rule them out? Other institutions in Scotland have done so. It would relieve a lot of stress for staff if they knew that that would not be part of the change programme, but at the moment the senior management team refuses to rule that out.

The other issue is that there are a number of people in interim positions at the University of Aberdeen. We have an interim principal and an interim university secretary. We also have a lot of new people in the institution, because a number of people left. We do not know them or how they operate as much as we would like to, and we do not get to know them because we cannot sit with

them and discuss things. We do not know what they are thinking or what their plans are.

I have one last brief point. We lodged a notice of dispute with the university in December, but we have had no dispute resolution meetings, so we are being completely denied engagement, which is not how things worked previously.

The Convener: Do you want to come in on that, Mr Forrester?

Stewart Forrester: No.

The Convener: Okay. I am seeing a lot of nods.

Sophia Woodman: The key point is that regular engagement does not mean meaningful consultation. You might know that, in December, UCU Edinburgh reached an agreement with management to pause industrial action in return for a pause to compulsory redundancies. We are waiting to see whether meaningful engagement means what it says and reflects what we think. The problem is that what management considers to be meaningful engagement might not meet what we think those standards should be. We have had some financial disclosure, but not enough. There has been an unwillingness to negotiate on a penny of the cuts proposed to staff—not one penny—even if the financial circumstances change. Management is using a lot of data from management consultants to shape some of the plans for change.

We also have this unaccountable structure, the university initiatives portfolio board, which has hired a lot of change management specialists. We do not know who they are—do they know anything about universities? For a year, we have asked for the data generated by those management consultants that informs management's decisions, and we have not received access to any of it.

The Convener: I think that we will touch on those points as—

Stewart Forrester: I thought that you were going to go around the table, which is why I said no to your question. I apologise.

The Convener: I was going to do so, but I have also taken up half an hour of our session with just my questions.

Stewart Forrester: Can I say what is happening at the University of Strathclyde now, please?

The Convener: Can we perhaps do it later? There are other questions on this, so I want to bring in Paul McLennan in a second. If we get further through the session and you have not been able to get your points across, I will bring you back in. I just want to ensure that members from all parties get the opportunity to ask questions.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I think that Stewart Forrester started to touch on the point that I want to make. There is an element here to consider: is the issue with university management cultural or structural? What needs to change? We have heard from unions at all four universities that there are issues with senior management and mismanagement. Do the universities need culture change or structural change?

Sophia Woodman touched on having an influence and finding out more about things, so I am trying to understand where you think that the problem lies. Dundee is a case of its own, but I am interested in the specifics of how university management needs to change.

Stewart Forrester: The culture has changed at my university. Up to October, all three unions had a really good relationship with human resources, but once the university started tapping people on the shoulder and not letting us know what was happening, the culture suddenly changed. It took all three unions to put a grievance to the university to say that what it was doing to us was unacceptable.

10:00

The university is now starting to talk to us, but the whole culture is now all money driven. It is all about saving money and the university's reputation. As you know, the University of Strathclyde has won many awards over the years, but since Jim McDonald left, the whole culture has changed.

My university had a good relationship with the unions, but it has gone toxic because the university needed to save money. It never gave us any information. It gave people 30 days' notice to save their jobs, but it would not give them a timescale. There would be a TikTok talk and, after that, it would turn round and say, "You two people are going," when they thought they were just having a conversation. They were told that they had been picked to go. Either they could take the voluntary way or it would be compulsory redundancy.

We have asked for compulsory redundancy to be taken away, and Unite and UCU are running a ballot right now on taking action against my university on that, but the new principal has not recognised our dispute. He has not come back to us even once to say that he recognises what is going on.

The whole culture of my university has changed. We used to have a really good rapport, but it has gone toxic now, and that is wrong for a university. We all have to talk and we all have to get on, so we need to find something to resolve this.

The Convener: I would like to move us on a little bit, if that is okay. We have received apologies from Ross Greer this morning and his party colleague Maggie Chapman is attending as a substitute. We now move to Maggie's questions.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Thank you, convener. Before I start, I remind colleagues of my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am rector of the University of Dundee. I also send my solidarity to UCU members who are on strike at the University of Dundee today.

My first chunk of questions is about the student experience and the impact of all the uncertainty and culture change on them. Students often have to bear the consequences of cuts and mismanagement, but they are excluded from decision making. Can each of you give us a flavour of the direct impact on students of course closures, loss of staff and rising staff workloads? Are those impacts on students being accounted for or measured in any way? I will start with Dan Cutts.

Dan Cutts: Before coming here, I spoke with colleagues from the Aberdeen University Students Association, because it is important that we listen to students on what they are experiencing. We see it in the classroom, but it is sometimes good to get a direct view from the AUSA president.

Student support services are being diminished and we do not have the level of staffing that we used to have. To put that in context, we have a cost of living crisis and those services are stretched. The other thing to say about students—this is my personal observation—is that, in the past few years, so many more students have to work alongside studying, and that creates additional pressures for them. That is related to the cost of living and I do not see that we have enough resources to cope with the demand. It is a real problem.

When a programme such as adapting for continued success comes around, students will see the senior management team give information that everything will be fine, but they said that about modern languages and we found out that that was never going to be the case. We have difficulty getting students to engage with those change programmes, because they are quite scary in terms of what might happen, so it is difficult for them to engage directly, but we are helping with that where we can.

More broadly, the staff are experiencing workload issues and there has been a reduction in the number of staff, but that does not mean that there are fewer students, so we are doing more with less. It is a real concern that, if people are overworked, they will be less able to give a great student experience; I would say that we still do give a great student experience, but it is under a lot more pressure than it used to be.

Maggie Chapman: So, staff still want to deliver and are delivering a positive student experience, but it comes at a cost to their personal, physical, and emotional wellbeing.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: We have closely monitored the staff reductions against the student numbers. It is undeniable that the academic staff to student ratio in Dundee has gone down as a result of the loss of colleagues through voluntary severance, resignation and retirement: at the moment, it is about 1:10. That is the best-case scenario, but we know that, in some areas of the university, the ratio is more like 1:35 or 1:40. Of course, the fact that the University of Dundee employs a lot of staff on research contracts skews the numbers.

There is no doubt that such cuts will impact the student experience. How much more can we tolerate if we are to continue to deliver the experience that students currently have? There is no question but that students are already impacted. You have probably read in the news about the experience of architecture students who fought to keep their tutors when, at the beginning of the academic year, the university could not decide whether there would be a budget for tutors, which jeopardised the accreditation of the architecture degree. Before the situation with the architecture tutors, we saw a similar situation in medicine.

There are many examples of what we in the sector call hidden redundancies, which are not really reported in the news and do not appear in official numbers. Often, a tutor will have their contracted hours reduced, or will just receive an email to say that their services are not required any more. That situation usually affects staff who are on precarious short-term contracts and are often poorly paid but who do an amazing job supporting the education that we deliver. They are invaluable members of staff, but they have seen their contracts reduced or terminated with very short notice. As I said, those redundancies happen before the formal numbers are even put on paper.

We worry about the kind of service that we can offer to the students in terms of support for their mental health. At the beginning of the academic year, we had an incident where we had only one mental health nurse available, so all new referrals of students to the mental health services had to be paused. That situation was resolved quickly, but we expect that such situations could arise again if the university were to go ahead with deeper cuts to staffing.

Sophia Woodman: I already mentioned the fact that we now have larger classes and tutorial

groups. There have also been cuts to courses. For example, our third and fourth-year geography honours students came back in September to find that fully one third of their optional courses in geography had disappeared. Those were courses on which people were already registered, and they had to scramble around at the last minute to find places on other courses, some of which were already oversubscribed. We tried to challenge those decisions, but there was no real accountability.

We work closely with the unions at the university and with our colleagues at the Edinburgh University Students Association. They are deeply concerned about the impact on student learning and student experience and have been raising those issues in the university court. It is fair to say that they are frustrated by the limited extent to which management has listened to their concerns.

We have a situation with hidden redundancies that is similar to the one that Melissa D'Ascenzio talked about.

Let us recall that some of the people who do tutoring are also students. The PhD students who tutored in one part of the university found that the hours of paid work that they would often depend on to pay their rent and cover their bills had been cut. That meant that they had no opportunity for professional development in teaching, which should be part of any PhD researcher's learning journey in the university. Otherwise, they have no means to make a living. Some of those students are also paying fees.

That is a shocking example of how the cuts are having an impact on students. We need to think about students across a broad range. There are larger classes, stressed staff and fewer opportunities for interaction with staff and individual attention, and that has a very serious impact on student learning.

Stewart Forrester: We won an award for the student experience but, as UCU and Unison pointed out, that will not happen next year, because of the cutbacks. Students will not get the same experience that they had last year, due to there being fewer people to look after the students and give them the student experience.

Maggie Chapman: Sophia, you talked about postgrad tutors. What about other groups of students? I am thinking about the university's ethical obligations towards international students. Are you seeing radical changes to the promises that were made to those students or the conditions that they were offered in coming to study here? Have they changed radically? Does any of you have any comments about the impacts on international students in particular?

Sophia Woodman: Inevitably, the matters that we have been discussing also have an impact on international students. In my academic life, I do some study of Chinese students, their experience and their migration to the UK for higher education. As I have been saying for many years, based on that research, universities too often treat those students like cash cows; they do not really consider them as students or provide them with adequate support. There has been support for masters students who have never studied in an English-medium university before to develop their academic writing in English. That is a big ask. The students need support and people to provide it. That is the kind of thing that is being cut at Edinburgh, because it is sort of optional. I think that the experience for those students will get worse—and it was already not great.

Maggie Chapman: A couple of you have mentioned engagement with the student associations. In your view, how does university management treat the students? Are they given fair opportunities to engage in decision making in the governance structures? I know that there are formal positions for student reps in the court and so on, but are the students actually listened to?

Dan Cutts: Through the adapting for continued success programme, the students are getting a very similar treatment to the treatment that we are getting. There is consultation on the face of it: there are workshops and meetings. However, all the reports from those meetings suggest that nothing is actually being consulted on or decided. It very much seems like there is a plan that is going ahead, and the meetings that students and staff can attend are being held so that senior management can say, "We've consulted on this." However, the ability to change or influence what is happening is very limited.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I want to reinforce what Dan Cutts has said. We have a very clear example in Dundee, where the university is engaging in a massive restructuring exercise, going from schools to faculties. It feels like students have been given very little voice in that. There have been comments from senior management that students do not care which faculty they belong to. The students will be given a survey to do after the deed, as the faculty restructuring has already been approved in principle by court, and it is therefore going ahead. Similarly, staff are being consulted using a post hoc survey.

What kind of engagement or feedback from students is expected? If the students were to come back and say, "We really don't like this. Let's go back to having schools," would that happen? I do not think so.

10:15

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Good morning. I will start with you, Mr Forrester, if you do not mind. I am very aware of the time so, if anybody else wants to come in, please just raise your hand—I hope that that will allow others to come in.

In a recent letter to the committee, the Minister for Higher and Further Education said that the upcoming letter of guidance would set out that Scottish Funding Council must collate and publish information on principal pay. What are your views on that announcement, and what impact do you think that it will have?

Stewart Forrester: I will give you a for instance. I have been at Strathclyde university for 50 years. I started off at £3.50 an hour; I am now on £13.50 an hour. That is a 20p pay rise every year for 50 years. This is the difference: my principal is now on £460,000 a year. That is a big difference.

We are not in it for the pay; we are in it to look after the students, but, yes—we would like a pay rise. I think that, if it was not for the living wage or national wage, the university would pay us less for what we do. We are the backbone of the university—the security, the cleaners, the gardeners and everybody else who looks after it—and we still do not get treated as we should be.

My university spends £21 million a month on salaries. Of that, £990,000 goes on 500 staff who look after the university estate; the rest goes to salaries for those above. I believe that 13 members of the executive committee get £300,000 a month or something like that—I am not quite sure, but on that committee they are on over £250,000 each. If the university was equal and fair, it would pay the people at the bottom a standard wage to make things better for them.

I understand that the university is a business, and if it wants a top man to run the university, it has to pay for it, like any other business, but I think that a salary of £460,000 is too much.

Sophia Woodman: Unlike our principal, I do know what his salary is. [*Laughter*.] You might like to know that his remuneration is £375,000, but the total, including a pension and housing benefit—he has a free house on Calton Hill, with staff—comes to about £426,000. I say that in part because there is a problem with high pay, and not just for the principal; it is an issue of growth in the number of high-paid staff in the university, while we are facing some really serious issues of low pay, as Stewart Forrester has outlined. People are under the impression that the universities are full of high-paid staff, but that is really not true. Among our members, the largest group of staff earn between £40,000 and £60,000, but we have lots of members who are on very low pay. When it comes to the other unions, the pay of Unison members is between £20,000 and £40,000, on average.

Low pay is a serious problem in universities. Even the highest-paid people's salaries have been significantly declining in value: our union estimates that there has been a decline of about 25 per cent over the past 15 years. It would be a very good thing if the SFC would look at not just VCs' pay but high pay in general in the sector.

Jackie Dunbar: It is a nice job if you can get it, then.

Would publishing that information across the board have a positive impact? That would take away the secrecy about what individual principals may or may not be earning and we could, as you say, maybe help them by telling them how much they all earn. Do you think that that could be positive if done in the right way?

Sophia Woodman: I think that it would be a very positive move. Also, university principals are heads of charities. Universities are not businesses, so this idea that they are business leaders and their salaries need to be competitive is an indication that there is something wrong with the narrative around universities in general. However, yes, it would be a very good thing.

Dan Cutts: An interesting point is that there are so many casualised staff at our institution. We continually see new people coming in on six-figure salaries, given the turnover of staff at the top level at the moment. However, people at the lower end and casualised staff get nowhere near that level of remuneration.

The other point to raise is that the pay spine is collapsing. The bottom 14 points of the 51-point pay spine are now the same because of the increases in the living wage. Basically, there is no difference now between grades 1 to 3 and the university is having to construct differences so that supervisors are not paid the same as the people they supervise. In that context, the issue needs to be negotiated, but it has not changed since 2006. It creates a massive problem for people at the bottom end of the pay scale.

It is very challenging to justify that level of pay at the top when we know that so many staff have had to leave the institution. I think that we are currently recruiting for three new vice principal posts but we have a hiring freeze elsewhere, so it is very much a case of "One rule for us, another rule for everybody else". There is a pause on promotions at the university at the moment, yet people can join at the top of the institution. It feels hypocritical to me.

Jackie Dunbar: Thank you. Sorry, Melissa—I am not going to attempt your surname. My apologies.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: That is fine. I just want to make two points. The first one is about the pay of principals and vice chancellors. The committee is probably already familiar with the von Prondzynski report—it is from 2012, so it is already more than 10 years old. It had very good recommendations on that area. It is not just about having transparency on how much people are paid; it is also about fairness across the board. One of the recommendations in the von Prondzynski report was that percentage increases beyond what other staff are awarded should be abolished and that bonuses for higher managers should be abolished unless they are made in a transparent manner. That would mean, for example, involving university staff and students in remuneration committees and not having everything decided behind closed doors. There are already recommendations on the way forward.

My other point is that the issue is not just about the pay of vice chancellors; it is also about the pay of senior management overall. The University of Dundee says that it needs to make large savings on staff costs. At the same time, it is restructuring and is creating up to 16 new full-time jobs for assistant vice principals and deputy vice principals or faculty vice principals. A lot of these jobs used to be roles—individuals within the university would allocate 30, 40, or 50 per cent of their time to the role of associate dean of research, for example, or associate dean of education and student experience. However, now those roles are going to be full-time, substantial jobs, with the university potentially paying £100,000 for each job.

It feels very hypocritical that staff are being told that they will not get their pay award—that is what happened at Dundee; we still have not had our pay award—that promotions are frozen and that there is no job re-evaluation scheme, while another layer of management is being set up. It will have 16 full-time positions, four of which will be in the university executive group—and you can imagine what that means in terms of remuneration.

Jackie Dunbar: That is interesting.

Stewart Forrester: I was on the committee in 2005 when the national agreement on pay negotiations was opened up, and I am still on the JNCHES. When we get a pay rise of 1.4 per cent, we automatically go into dispute and, as soon as that happens, the Universities and Colleges Employers Association takes it off the table again because we are in dispute. That means that, every year that we go into dispute, UCEA does not look at the framework agreement.

Everybody agrees that the framework agreement is broken. Ever since the Government brought in the national living wage, the bottom scales have been totally destroyed. There used to be a £450 difference with skills, but that has now corroded to 5p, 10p or 20p. Every time we talk about that, UCEA agrees that it is broken, but, every time that it offers us a pay rise of 1.4 per cent—the rest of Britain got nearly 3.2 or 3.5 per cent, but we got 1.4 per cent because we are educational—it takes that off the table again because we are in dispute. It is a catch-22 situation. That discussion has to be separate from the pay negotiations and at a different forum—somebody has to tell UCEA that that is what has to happen.

In addition, we are not allowed to have a JNCHES for Scotland. The Scottish universities vote against that because they all want to be in the same wee club. We cannot even negotiate separately in Scotland on this, either. We still have to go down to London to talk about our terms and conditions.

Jackie Dunbar: You said "negotiate separately". Do you mean separately for each university or separately as in all Scottish universities?

Stewart Forrester: There are 156 universities in Britain. Scotland has its own universities. Over the years, we have been asking to have our own JNCHES in Scotland, so that we can open up to Scottish universities and say, "Look, there's the spinal column, there's the terms and conditions, there's the old universities, there's the new universities and there's the difference between the salaries". We need a proper talk. However, the Scottish universities do not want that; they want to stay with the national universities, so that is outvoted every time. They do not have the teeth to say anything because it is the universities that they are managing.

Jackie Dunbar: So, it is the principals and their teams saying that.

Stewart Forrester: It is like the living wage: 69 universities refused to pay the living wage this year because they could not afford it, and we did not have any say in that. However, come April this year, they have to pay it because they would be breaking the law if they did not; before, they did not have to pay it. If you think about it, if you are on £13.50 an hour, that is nothing compared with what the people at the top get, but the people at the bottom have now caught up with the people who have skills. That causes animosity down at the bottom between people in different departments. For example, gardeners and security staff think, "Why am I getting paid the same as a cleaner?" It is not the cleaners' fault, and they are just as vital as anybody else in the university, but it causes animosity among the workforce.

A clear, set scale must be put forward. The way that my university resolved the issue when the

£13.50 came in was to give a 5p or 10p difference. You cannot have people on the same wage, so those with a skill were given an extra 10p an hour for their skill. I have a charge-hand cleaner at grade 3 and she is now only getting paid 45p more than a cleaner. She is two grades above with all these skills and looking after all these people. That causes animosity.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): An element of my question comes into what has just been talked about. From April 2027, all fair work first criteria become conditions of the SFC grant. How effective do the witnesses think that that will be at bringing about positive changes for university staff?

Dan Cutts: Fair work first looks absolutely brilliant, and we really welcome it. However, my issue with it is, if the senior management team does not follow the principles, which is what we are currently experiencing, what happens? That is my question.

We could perhaps withdraw from the signed agreement, but that would put a lot of pressure on us in terms of funding and so on, and we would be harming the institution. Would I want to be the one who was responsible for my colleagues not getting money and who was putting jobs at risk because the senior management team refused to abide by the principles?

For me, it is about enforcement. What happens if a senior management team refuses to engage on the issues that it is supposed to engage on? It would be really interesting to know that, because the situation puts the unions in quite a stressful position in engaging with the principles and taking them forward.

10:30

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I have a similar view, as that has been our experience at Dundee. The fair work principles are brilliant, and it would be excellent if they were applied fully. We welcome the extension to include all the fair work principles. Currently, the university has to adhere to a couple of them, but not all of them. We welcome that extension, but we have the same issue with compliance. What happens if an institution is not compliant? That puts a lot of pressure on us.

People tend to forget that we are all volunteers—we are not union officials. Therefore, we also have a job that we do at universities, so we really feel for the security of our job and for our colleagues' ability to secure funding and continue their careers. That is really hard.

In theory, universities should abide by the effective voice principle, which means having a safe environment where dialogue and challenge are welcomed. However, as you have seen from the Gillies report, that was not the case at the University of Dundee, and that continues to be the situation. What happens next? Where do we go? How can we enforce the fair work principles?

Sophia Woodman: Obviously, it is positive to expand the approach to include all the fair work principles, but I share many of the concerns that others have raised. The key question is about monitoring. What does "worker voice" mean? We have already been covered by that principle for some time, but we do not see sufficient meaningful consultation. Therefore, the critical aspect is monitoring and enforcement. One would hope that that would be done in a serious way, and Government might have a role in making the principles have more teeth.

I want to raise one additional point, which is about the equalities dimension. We know that the structure of the higher education workforce is deeply unequal, and that unequal pay and conditions are a problem in the sector. The cuts are making that situation worse, as they will inevitably fall most heavily on the most vulnerable and casualised staff, a larger proportion of whom are female, from ethnic minorities, LGBT and so on. There is a real question about the cuts programmes and equalities. That is an issue on which serious monitoring is needed after April, once the extended principles come into force, to ensure that that is not just a tick-box exercise by university managers.

Stewart Forrester: We welcome the extension, but I cannot say any more on that, because we are still looking at it.

Bill Kidd: Okay—no problem. That is perfectly reasonable. I think that Maggie Chapman wants to say something about that.

Maggie Chapman: I have a couple of follow-up questions on the fair work principles. You have talked about the challenges of implementing the existing principles, never mind the rest when they come in in April next year. Is there a role for the Scottish Funding Council to make funding conditional on proper implementation of the fair work principles? Do you see that as one of the levers or mechanisms to ensure that management takes the principles seriously?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: Although it is a good point, I think that we would end up with the same issue where we report the institution for not following fair work principles, and that would then jeopardise SFC funding, which is not what we would want. Speaking from my perspective here, a way forward would be to transform the fair work principles into a leave-in document that contains multiple checks, rather than having a document that the university signs off once a year and is then

done with it. Maybe there is space to explore a different approach with a leave-in document and continuous conversation between the SFC, the university and the unions to ensure that the principles are being adhered to.

Maggie Chapman: Does anyone else want to bring in any other mechanisms? I understand the challenge and that you do not want to be responsible for a cut to funding, but what other levers or sticks do we have to ensure that management follows the principles that it is supposed to follow?

Sophia Woodman: I think that Melissa D'Ascenzio's suggestions are great. A simple thing that many universities could do is allow unions to have access to information on all new hires—although, given the conditions at the moment, we do not have a lot of them around the place. The universities always used to do that and it is in our recognition agreement, but because of general data protection regulations, they are not doing it. Simple things like giving access to all staff and expanding the role of unions and universities could be quite valuable.

Maggie Chapman: This is my last question on this. What important preparatory work needs to be done between now and April 2027 to make sure that, when the principles come in, everybody knows what they are, and they are ready to implement, record and monitor them? Other than proper engagement with the unions, what would be your wishes in this space?

Stewart Forrester: We have a fortnightly meeting when everything is brought up, then we have a joint union meeting every three months and those topics come up there. The university will usually give us a heads up about what is coming up, but then it gets put on the back burner and the paperwork comes out the day before we are supposed to have the meeting. Then they ask us if we have read it all when we have got about 25 pages in front of us. That is a tactic that universities are using.

Maggie Chapman: So, there is something there about changing the nature of the engagement entirely. Are there any other comments?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I seem to remember that the committee had an evidence session where our principal said that he was not familiar with the fair work principles. I imagine that there should be some training for principals and vice chancellors, and maybe members of the court, on fair work and what it means so that everybody is on the same page and knows what is expected. That could be valuable.

Dan Cutts: Yes, offering training and getting university courts involved would be effective. I suspect that we will have to be prepared for coming up against the argument about the autonomy of universities. We see that happen. I am naturally pessimistic about things and I just know that that is what will be said. However, what is important is how the fair work principles are approached and how we can get the best results for everybody. It is also in the universities' interests to follow the principles.

Maggie Chapman: That point was worth highlighting so thank you for that.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, and thank you for joining us today. A number of my questions have been covered, so I will not go over senior management pay and other issues.

How effective do you think your courts are with regard to knowing what is going on and leading decision making rather than just following?

Dan Cutts: I have always taken issue with the way in which the university court is used by the senior management team, and many of my colleagues have as well. For example, the senior management team will take plans to the university court, and the court will say, "Yes, you can go and do that." However, if we want to critique those plans, the SMT will say, "Well, the court has instructed us to do this, so we cannot change it now." We get caught in that nexus continually, and that causes us great concern about what is going to happen in relation to adapting for continued success.

Obviously, there is some trade union, student and staff representation on the court. I would like to see more staff and students being involved because—this is no criticism of the people on the court directly; it is just the way that the system operates—there are a number of independents to whom the trade union does not get any direct access even though the senior management team does. If everything is going to work effectively, there needs to be equality in that regard, so that everyone can hear from all of the voices. I suppose that that can link back to issues around fair work.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I will not repeat the findings of the Gillies report on the functioning of court at the University of Dundee—that was some harrowing reading.

The person who controls the information controls the narrative, and, unfortunately, that is exactly what happens at our university. The information that the university court receives is often provided by the executive group, which carefully controls the narrative. Court members must take it upon themselves to challenge the narrative and ask for additional data. From the reports that we get from our court nominees, it is clear that those challenges are often ignored or

minimised, and that it is always the same lonely voices who bring up issues and are eventually sidelined. There are issues with the way in which courts work.

There have been some changes at the university court in Dundee. We hope that those changes will also bring a change of attitude and more scrutiny. We know that there are still some issues in terms of, for example, the court receiving regular management accounts or seeing cash flow data, and with the publication of court minutes and minutes of court subcommittees.

I will go back to the Von Prondzynski report, because it is old but it is gold. It suggested—10 years ago—that the meetings of governance structures in the university, including court and senate, should be public, and I think that that is needed now more than ever. Staff deserve to see what our nominees or representatives are saying. On that point, I would like to make one comment specifically, because I have read the communication that our principal sent to your committee this morning and I note that it calls the unions' nominees "representatives". That is not correct, because a representative would bring the voice of the union into court, but that is not the case with nominees. Union nominees are trustees of the institution, just like all the other members of court, and are therefore held to the same standards as the other members of court. So, although we communicate with them, and, of course, they refer back to us when there are potential issues, their position in court is independent of their union role.

There is a lot to do, but, going back to the issue of transparency, members of staff deserve to know how our nominees, court members and senate members behave, how they vote and how those governance structures arrive at decisions.

10:45

Sophia Woodman: To give you an example from our university court: at last summer's meeting, when it voted to accept management's proposal for a £140 million cut in recurrent expenditure, including a £90 million cut to the staff budget, security was so tight that it was actually more extreme than for the visit of the head of the World Health Organization, which had taken place a couple of days before.

University staff do not even know where the court meets. Minutes do not get released until the next court meeting three months later, so we do not know what was discussed at meetings that are so consequential for our institution. That level of secrecy is a really serious problem. I fully share Melissa D'Ascenzio's view about transparency. I do not think that it used to be that way—there has been a shift in recent years.

One of the key problems is also that university courts are stacked with outside co-opted members, and management and the outside co-opted members always have the overwhelming majority. However hard our staff members and student members at the university court work to get an alternative perspective presented there, it tends to be ignored. At a recent court meeting, staff and student representatives were actually in tears about not being listened to.

Trade unions at Edinburgh have received some financial disclosure after a lot of pressure, and we are told that that is the same level of information that the court gets. However, it is inadequate—there are no management accounts, no cash flow data and none of the workings behind decisions. Transparency is needed, and staff and students should have a majority on university courts. The next Parliament could introduce straightforward governance reforms, which would make sense, because academic freedom also encompasses faculty self-governance—a key principle in how universities should be run.

Stewart Forrester: A court is a secret society—let us be honest. My union has a lay member on the court. Before a court session begins, he is taken to a room and told by the vice-principal what will be said, and he is told that he is not allowed to speak. When he goes to the committee and listens to what is said, he is not allowed to report it back to the other unions, because he has to sign an agreement that says he will lose his job if he does so, due to the requirement for total confidentiality, so I do not understand why we even have a member on the board.

It is a secret society that needs to be broken. The court has to be open and free with what happens at universities. As has been said, you wait about six months before the court publishes what was discussed. I have a member on my committee who cannot say what happened in the court that day because he would lose his job—that is how secret it is.

Miles Briggs: That is very helpful. We have been concerned about that transparency issue.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. It is ironic that you said that, because when Sophia Woodman spoke, I wrote in my notes, "It appears that the Edinburgh university court is a secret society."

Stewart Forrester: That is the masons.

George Adam: I did not put that in my notes, just for the record.

Stewart Forrester: Sorry. [*Laughter*.]

George Adam: Sophia, you spoke about a simple bit of legislation that the Parliament could bring in in the next session, which would involve looking at transparency. I was on this committee when the current system was put through, and we were told by those in senior management positions that it would be an absolute disaster because they would not be able to control the court, yet it appears that they have managed to find a way to do so. What ideas would you have if we were to look towards a future piece of legislation on the transparency of, and representation on, university courts?

Sophia Woodman: On representation, I have already said that the majority of those represented on the court should be staff and students. That makes sense. It does not make sense that external members, often with no experience in higher education, are making decisions on our behalf, and are not contactable. We do not have—

George Adam: Those were all arguments that were made when the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016 was originally passed. We were told that it was going to be the end of the earth—the end of all things—if we went down those lines.

Sophia Woodman: On transparency, we all understand that there may be certain financial data that has to be kept confidential for commercially sensitive reasons, but that should be minimal. University staff and students deserve to have the outcomes of court meetings published straight away.

What happened at Edinburgh university is unconscionable. An enormous cut is decided, and all that we get is an email with the principal's interpretation of what happened at the meeting of court, until the minutes are finally approved at the court's meeting in September.

I would need to go away and ask some of our staff reps on court what they would recommend on transparency, but I am happy to follow up with the committee on what exactly that would mean. I am sure that other university union reps will, likewise, have really good suggestions.

I go back to my point that the external members of court should be contactable. They do not have an email address. Last year, during the divestment campaign at Edinburgh, we tried to find the email addresses of those external members, and that was seen as a big problem. They are on our governing body—they should at least be contactable.

Stewart Forrester: All that we need is a voice. Every committee has a voice; you have given us a voice here today, so I do not see why our court cannot give us a voice as well.

When the university was taking our pensions off us, the principal and the executive quickly went to the court and said, "We need this money—this is the reason why." We had our people sitting there saying, "You don't really need this money; why are you taking our pensions off us? You've got over £200 million sitting in the bank, but you still want this money."

We could not even say anything on that. They persuaded the court that, for the good of the university, they should get our pensions, and the court voted for that. We did not have a voice to say, "Here's the reasons why we're kicking back on ye. This is the reason we don't think the university needs the money. You've got £400 million-worth of assets sitting out there; you've got a place called Ross Priory, with a golf course, that's sitting there doing nothing—why do you need that? Why not just sell that off and keep jobs?" We do not even get a say on it.

The court should be open and transparent to anybody and everybody in the university, even to students—the whole lot. It should be there for people to listen tae, because it is a university, and it should be run as a university, not as a private function. People should be able to have a say on what is happening in universities.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I do not have a lot to add to that, but I am sure that the Scottish Parliament and the United Kingdom Parliament, as well as our own union, sometimes debate more controversial things than our university courts debate. If those Parliaments can sit in public and their meetings can be broadcast to the public, I do not see why the courts and senates in our institutions cannot do the same.

Of course, there would be exceptions that would have to be specifically defined through a code that says how they can be identified, and those items could be taken in private session. However, considering that we now have the technology, there is no reason why courts and senates cannot broadcast their meetings to all staff.

Dan Cutts: I will be brief. For me, it is about trust. Any attempts to have fewer staff and fewer students on the court implies that we are untrustworthy in some way. Why would the court not want to listen to more people who are actively engaged in the institution? I do not see a reason not to do that.

Miles Briggs: There was a lot of useful information there. My real concern, and where I think that the Scottish Funding Council should be around the transparency issue, is live information around institutions' finances, rather than annual reporting. A lot of the work that the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator does with charities in that regard is much more transparent. I think that

a piece of work on that needs to be done in the next session of Parliament.

I want to move on to the Scottish Government and Universities Scotland's launch of the framework for sustainability and success of Scotland's universities. What engagement have the unions had on that to date? If they have not had such engagement, what would you want that to look like?

Perhaps Stewart Forrester can start.

Stewart Forrester: It is good for the Government to actually notice us for a change, because we had not been in the headlights for ages. The Government was concentrating on colleges—it has given them a nice lump sum over the next three years, but because we are not part of the Government, we do not get the same treatment.

I would like to see the Scottish Government—I know that it is coming up for election, so if it gets back in—to work with universities to ensure that, going forward, they are sound and are in a proper position to look after their staff and their students.

Sophia Woodman: It is very positive to launch the review. It is proposed that there should be union representation on it, which would be excellent—there should be representatives of all the unions that represent workers in higher education. Again, I hope that that process can be open to submissions from unions regarding on-going concerns.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I support what Sophia Woodman has just said. All unions should be represented on that panel, and it would be helpful if the panel could, where necessary, get some information from reps like us who are not necessarily officials of the union. If the panel needs specific input, it would be good for that to come from local reps, too.

Dan Cutts: I agree, in short.

Miles Briggs: For those of us who have been calling for that review and who are working with the steering group, it is important that we have had that broad offer put forward. Some of it will be very challenging, but in its next session, Parliament will have to pick up that work in order to make our university sector sustainable. What comes out of that, and ensuring that the unions have, collectively, had their voices heard in the process, is important.

That is all from me, convener.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): Maybe I can touch on one or two issues that we have covered already. We heard from the principals or senior staff of Dundee and Edinburgh universities that, basically, they did not have good control of costs or what was actually happening in the university. Those cases were slightly different. At Edinburgh, there is a lot of decentralisation, with different schools or faculties—the centre did not seem to know what was going on, and costs were just allowed to drift. It appeared that staff numbers just kept increasing and nobody looked at that.

In a sense, I am perhaps playing devil's advocate here. There is an argument that some of the universities got a bit bloated and took on more staff than they should ever have had, and now they are coming back to what should be the normal level of staffing. Do you agree?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I am happy to answer that, because we have been looking very closely at staffing levels. At the moment, at the University of Dundee, staff numbers are the lowest that they have ever been in 20 years. During the time when Dundee was achieving incredible—well, not incredible, but substantial—increases in student fees, staff numbers did not change that much. The average number of full-time equivalent staff was always around 3,000. You can look back over the past 20 years—we have gone back to 2007, so we looked at all the staffing numbers—and see that they have been pretty much stable, at around 2,900 or 3,000 staff.

11:00

It is true that, in 2024, there was a jump in staff numbers, but only by around 260 FTE staff. We are now way below that, because we have lost around 490 FTE staff through voluntary severance and, as I said earlier, through retirement, resignations and so on. I completely disagree, therefore, with the narrative that the University of Dundee's staff is overinflated. I think that the other trade unions would also disagree with that. In fact, if we were to go ahead with what has been set out in the university recovery plan for the University of Dundee, the staffing numbers would be almost halved.

I would like to ask the committee a question. How do we deliver the same Dundee experience and the same programmes and courses that we have delivered over the past 20 years with half the number of staff?

John Mason: And yet the numbers have to add up—the income cannot be less than the expenditure, can it?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I am sorry–I am not sure that I understand that.

John Mason: The university's accounts have to balance—

Melissa D'Ascenzio: Yes.

John Mason: They cannot make a loss year after year, so the costs have to be kept at the same level as the income, do they not?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I agree with that, but the question is very much about a vision. Our current leadership has portrayed, in the university recovery plan, a shrinking university with falling student numbers. Those are all assumptions that are made in order to project the future deficit. If you are very pessimistic in your view, that comes out in the numbers. That does not mean that those numbers will necessarily materialise and that the deficit will be as large as has been predicted. That predicted deficit has all sorts of assumptions underlying it, and the assumptions are that the university is shrinking and there is no space for growth. It is assumed that the capital expenditure would be X amount, which the university executive group has clearly identified in the recovery plan without specifying what capital expenditure it will engage in—

John Mason: The capital expenditure would not immediately hit the profit-and-loss account. The capital expenditure would be separate, would it not?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: Yes, but it will eventually balance with the impact. Staff numbers in the university are now the lowest that they have ever been.

John Mason: They are the lowest that they have ever been. That is a good bit of information to have. Would that be the case for Edinburgh? Does it have the lowest-ever staff numbers?

Sophia Woodman: Our staff numbers—as I think that I said at the beginning—declined from last year to this year by almost 800, with some staff gone to voluntary severance. However, the University of Edinburgh is enormous, so I would come back on the idea that it is too decentralised. We do a lot of different things: we have a medical school, a veterinary school, a school of education and an art school. The idea that we would have centralised rules and services for all those elements does not make a lot of sense, because they do very different things.

John Mason: I agree with that, but would you agree that, in every bit of the university, the expenditure cannot be higher than the income?

Sophia Woodman: We know that, in recent years—I can check the time period—the number of people who are paid more than £100,000 a year has grown by more than 30 per cent. There has been higher growth in that area than in other areas of staffing.

John Mason: Do you know about the staff numbers? Over the past 10 years, say, have the staff numbers increased, fallen or stayed the same?

Sophia Woodman: I do not have figures for the whole 10 years—

John Mason: Or five years, or whatever.

Sophia Woodman: The numbers have increased, but not massively. We can look at academic staff numbers from 2021 to 2025-26. In 2021, there were 8,140 staff—that is head count rather than FTE. This year, there are 8,535. For professional services over the same time period, the number of staff went from 7,135 to 8,575. The growth is not massive and, in the meantime, we have massively grown the student population. Over the past 10 years, the University of Edinburgh has gone from 35,000 students to almost 50,000, so inevitably we need more people—

John Mason: I get it: there has been quite a big increase.

Mr Cutts, in your answers to previous questions, you touched on the issue of the university being an autonomous institution. The committee has struggled with that a bit, because we do not know at what stage the OFS, or whoever it is, would come in and say, "Oh, the Government's interfering too much." I do not know whether you have a good handle on that. Could we—the Parliament and the Government—interfere a bit more and would that be okay, or would there be a risk that the universities would lose their autonomy?

Dan Cutts: When we are thinking about the university, there is not just the university court—there is also the senate. There are different structures that operate. The senate is supposed to have autonomy over academic research matters; whether or not it is consulted consistently is a separate issue.

However, I think that you have to try and see how far you get. It is obvious, from what we are hearing today, that the system is not functioning in the correct way. We can look at staff numbers, for example. Every member of staff is facing an increasing workload, so even if staff numbers were reduced—to fit in with some sort of marketised view of how things should balance up—those people are overworking. I hear stories all the time of people putting in way over what they are supposed to at work.

John Mason: Is that not just part of society? We hear the same from the national health service and from schools. Is that not just part of life?

Dan Cutts: There is health and safety legislation around that. For example, if someone has not signed out of the working time directive, they

should not be working more than 40 hours a week. Many people in higher education have not signed out of the working time directive, but they are forced, in order to maintain their career and to deliver for students, to work over the limit in the directive. Some of them are working 30 or 40 hours over what they are supposed to work per week. That is across the whole sector; I am sure that colleagues around the table would be able to tell stories like that.

If people want to work hard and get some recognition for it, I completely get that point. However, what we are seeing is that if the funding is not keeping up, and staff are working more and more, there is no give in the system. People cannot work more if they are already at the maximum. It is very difficult.

John Mason: How far should the university be able to decide how it spends its money? That has come up already. Should we be interfering more and saying, "Well, you can spend only so much on capital and pay more in wages", and get into that kind of detail?

Dan Cutts: The core mission of the university would be set out to deliver education and research; at Aberdeen, we also now support the community at home and internationally in the way that we are functioning. Once those things start to become under threat, I think that you have to step in. I do not see where we are going if there is not an attempt to step in. I know that senior management teams will be very quick to try to oppose any interference, but where are we going to end up in the next five or 10 years?

John Mason: The colleges are in the public sector and they are also struggling. They cannot get money for cladding or for dealing with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—all of that kind of stuff. Being in the public sector is not a magic bullet, is it?

Dan Cutts: It is very challenging—I accept that. However, something has to work, right? We do not want to lose any universities in Scotland; that is not what we want, because once they are gone, they are gone, and all the issues around what are known as cold spots will start manifesting. We want to provide world-leading education and to be internationally recognised. Those are the core things that we want to achieve.

The issue that I have with the way in which the senior management team operates is that it is too focused on the commercialisation aspect. Universities operate by cross-subsidising at various points. Aberdeen has been there for a very long time, and different things are popular at various points. It is about having a long-term view. The problem that we have is that everything is about the yearly accounts: "What is our deficit this year? Oh—it's looking too high," or it is too low. Some of these institutions have been here for hundreds of years.

John Mason: Could the framework for sustainability and success sort the issue? Is it going to sort it?

Dan Cutts: If there is correct engagement and people are listened to effectively, I would like to think that we would be able to work towards something that is better.

John Mason: What would your key hopes be in that process?

Dan Cutts: That is a good question and I do not have an answer. Obviously, we hope to achieve sustainability and the ability to deliver what we need to.

John Mason: Mr Forrester, you said earlier that you think that more public money should be going into universities, which I thought was interesting.

Stewart Forrester: Yes.

John Mason: Edinburgh and Glasgow universities are fabulously rich, so why should they get extra money?

Stewart Forrester: It is a catch-22 situation. If I was working for a Government body, I would have got a 4.2per cent pay rise this year and for a further three years, because that is what was given to the colleges this year. Universities are all autonomous. Each of the 156 universities in Britain is its own person. They do not listen to anybody else. They are in their own wee castles in the middle of nowhere, saying, "This is how we run the university." They take the money in and then give it out.

You said earlier that my university paid out £21 million a month in wages. The Government gave us £117 million tax free this year, because we are a charity, to pay for Scottish students, but my university had to pay £29 million out of its own pocket to educate them.

John Mason: If the university has got that money in its pocket, why not?

Stewart Forrester: But why should we have to pay what the Government, whatever Government it is, should pay to educate a Scottish student? Why should my university pay for that?

John Mason: If Strathclyde university has deep pockets and can pay for it, and the NHS cannot pay for its staff, surely the Government has to put the money into the NHS, not into the university.

Stewart Forrester: Right. As I said, it is a catch-22 situation. You have seen my university. Most universities have money in their pocket, but some universities do not. For them to pay for Scottish

students, who they should not have to pay for, puts a burden on the other universities. Why should we lose jobs or other things because whatever Government it is, is making us pay for that? That is what I do not get my head round about. You say that it is free education for students in Scotland, but it is not, because we are paying for it.

John Mason: Well, someone is paying for it, yes.

Stewart Forrester: Yes, but the point is that you are paying so much and we are paying so much. Why should we, as a university, pay to educate students when it is your job to pay to educate the students, not ours? That is my argument. I will leave it at that.

John Mason: I get that argument and there are obviously different arguments to be made. You made a good point about how some universities are not as well off as others.

Stewart Forrester: Abertay University has 90 per cent Government funding. It does not have the same outcomes as we have.

John Mason: Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of the West of Scotland would probably be the same. Should we be focusing our money more on the poorer universities and less on the richer universities?

Stewart Forrester: We were going to go to Parliament and say that Oxford, Cambridge and all those places get billions upon billions of pounds. Why can the big universities not put some money into a pot to help other universities out? That is not going to happen because they are their own society. We go to the Universities and Colleges Employers Association and say, "Why is that university struggling? How can that other university in the same area not help them out?" We get told, "It's their money; nothing to do with us."

Glasgow university has up-paid everybody a pay rise to stop them going on strike or taking strike action. That is how the universities work: they have autonomy. It is a catch-22 situation. If we were in the Government, I would be sitting here happy because I would have had a 4.2 per cent pay rise this year, but we are not in the Government, so the university gives us 1.4 per cent, which is well below inflation. University staff are 17.5 per cent behind inflation, because we do not get recognised by the universities. We are either in the Government or we are not in the Government, but only when it suits the university.

John Mason: Let me move on to someone else now.

Stewart Forrester: I have had my rant.

John Mason: Ms Woodman, do you want to touch on the longer-term picture of what you see coming from the framework for sustainability and success?

Sophia Woodman: This is a tricky problem to unpick. All our unions are strongly supportive of continuing the system of free tuition for Scottish students. My union, UCU, thinks that there should not be tuition fees.

Education is a public good, and it needs to be refocused. The marketised system has failed. As I said, Edinburgh is one of the system's winners, yet it is still doing this to its staff and students, which is a clear indication that the system has failed.

At the current point, the Government needs to provide more funding. The nurses and doctors who work in the national health service are trained in colleges and universities, as are so many other professionals in our society. As I said, education is a public good.

11:15

John Mason: Edinburgh university has more reserves than the Scottish Government.

Sophia Woodman: I know.

John Mason: So why should the Scottish Government give it more money?

Sophia Woodman: I was going to come to that in a sec. Government can create better frameworks for universities in the current context, and one area where that could happen is in relation to reserves. The trade unions at Edinburgh have been asking again and again why the university cannot use some of its enormous reserves as a rainy-day fund if it needs to rebalance expenditure and income, as it claims—we would dispute that claim. As a charity, that is what it should be doing. That is the kind of issue that Government frameworks could address.

Another issue that could be addressed is the distribution of students. It might be funny to hear me saying that, given that Edinburgh has in a way benefited from the decline of other universities, in that we suck up students from everywhere. However, a return to a more planned economy for students would help everyone and is something that Government could consider.

You talked about sustainability. Long-term plans are needed. The committee heard from vice-chancellors last summer that creating a new programme, attracting new groups of students and educating students is a long process, so sustainability is needed to do that.

John Mason: I will have to draw my questions to a close, but I thank you all.

Paul McLennan: I want to make a couple of observations on a point that John Mason and

George Adam raised, and then I will move on to the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill.

I will go back to the discussions on the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016, which was meant to provide a more balanced approach. What we have heard all morning—I touched on this earlier—is that there is a lack of transparency from universities, a lack of governance and a lack of respect, which is one of the key things. You are asking for increased co-operation and more co-production. Melissa D'Ascenzio mentioned that people were being presented with a fait accompli and then asked for their views on it.

I am keen to hear brief thoughts on that. The aim of the 2016 act has obviously not been achieved, as here we are, 10 years later, looking at the same issues. Some of the issues—we will probably touch on the University of Dundee later—are indicative of the lack of transparency and co-production.

What are your brief thoughts on that? Has the 2016 act achieved its goals? That is a key learning point in relation to where we are now. I will put that to Sophia Woodman first and then open it up to the other witnesses. A clear message from all your evidence today is that there has been a lack of respect, transparency and consultation.

Sophia Woodman: The 2016 act's articulation of standards on academic freedom has been very important. However, the dimension of academic freedom that involves self-governance, academic autonomy and in particular the role of academics in running further and higher education institutions is crucial, and that part was missing from the legislation.

Clearly, there is more to be done, and there has been a conflict between the push to marketisation—the focus on the financial interests of universities—and universities' core mission, which further legislation needs to address.

Paul McLennan: I will come to Melissa D'Ascenzio, because the key message that is coming through is that there is a lack of consultation with not just the students but the unions. Will you expand on that? We will probably come on to Dundee separately, but will you talk about the general principle?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: One main takeaway from the Gillies report was that the existing governance codes were up to scratch. The problem, therefore, does not lie specifically in the guidance, the financial memorandum or the Scottish code of good higher education governance, which were up to scratch, but in compliance and as part of that—we have had this discussion on the fair work agreement—in engagement with staff, trade union representatives and students.

I say this with a heavy heart but, despite the Gillies report and the agenda of items that the Dundee university executive group put forward in response to it—such as its own action plan, which it should have followed—true consultation is still lacking. In our submission to this committee, we highlighted how the university recovery plan was given to the unions a day before it was submitted to the SFC. The union representatives made suggestions about the plan and in particular on engagement—again, we come back to the same topic. I will let the committee guess how many of those changes were incorporated in the final submission. After that, the SFC wrote to the university and said that those in interim positions could not make such long-term decisions and needed to involve staff, students and trade unions in the process.

The unions, together, have held a series of town hall meetings throughout the period. I like to think that those have been really helpful for staff, because staff have gotten information from those that was not coming directly from management communication. It was very clear that staff wanted to contribute. A lot of our staff are proud to work for the University of Dundee; they really feel that connection and they wanted to work with the university executive group to rebuild the university. They were given no opportunity to do that.

The listening exercise should have been part of the process. There were five questions, if I remember correctly. The response that related to wellbeing was published immediately and made available to staff. However, responses to the two questions about income generation and how we should rebuild the university have not been published. Management keep telling us that it is looking at those and thinking about them, but we do not have a lot of time for thinking.

The point is that the funding that we were to receive from the Scottish Government would have given us time to think about how we could grow out of the crisis as well as balance our books. The approach from management seems to have been either that we do nothing or that we cut all staff, but there is something in between. We can involve unions, students and staff in putting forward ideas, some of which already exist and have been part of the task force that was led by Sir Alan Langlands.

I am sorry—I made a big detour there. Despite the action plan—one point of which is about meaningful consultation and relationships with unions—I understand that, in December, the university submitted to the SFC four documents of which we have had no sight. We asked for them after the submission, but we still have not seen

them. From our perspective, therefore, nothing has changed.

On how the situation can be changed, we have put forward a proposal. From our side, we think that a rewrite of the governance structure is needed.

We have to admit that the experiment of bringing marketisation and managerialism into higher education, which began 15 or 20 years ago, has failed. Before 2009, Dundee had deans who were elected from among the staff. They had a clear understanding of the university, its challenges and its strengths and they served a five-year tenure that was renewable for another five years before they went back into the community. That is a key point—that any change that someone makes as principal or as a dean should be one that they will be subject to when they go back to work among their colleagues. A dean who lost the trust of their colleagues within the five years of their first mandate would not be elected again, which created accountability.

We must accept that the experiment, which has lasted for about 15 years, has failed and has created a top level of managers who often do not teach or do any research in our institutions. That has brought us to where we are.

Paul McLennan: That is really powerful.

Does Dan Cutts or Stewart Forrester want to add anything?

Stewart Forrester: I think that the university treats the committee in the same way as it treats the unions. It listens to what you say but then carries on doing what it wants to do. That is how they do it—they listen to what we say and tell us that they will take on board the things that they have to do, but it is still their institution, and they run it in the way that they want to, because they are not governed by you or by the unions.

Paul McLennan: We have heard a really powerful message from all of you.

I want to move on.

The Convener: I will let Willie Rennie ask a question first.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Thank you for your evidence so far. I appreciate it and I understand your frustrations. The committee has taken lots of evidence, but trying to get to the truth has been really quite challenging, because there are some really complex matters.

There has been quite a lot of reform in recent years, including having elected chairs at various universities, and that has not been a roaring success. What are your observations about the reforms of recent years, including the election of chairs and the recent Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill, which brings greater oversight for the Scottish Funding Council? What are we not getting? What needs to change and what comments do you want to make about what has happened so far?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: We have covered quite a lot of the things that we would like to see. The bill is not my area of expertise, so I am not going to comment directly on whether it is good or bad, because that is not my place. I do think that it could have gone a little further in some places and that that is probably coming across in our discussion today. Some of the changes, such as extending the SFC's powers, are welcome, but we need to think seriously about what is best for governance. I find the election of the chair of court to be a positive thing.

Willie Rennie: Is it?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: It really is.

Willie Rennie: There has been an elected chair at Dundee, and that elected chair did not see the problems coming. Why was that?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I agree with that. Staff and students had disengaged for a long time and there were always very low levels of voting for the chair of court. Staff did not always engage fully with the process, and the crisis at Dundee has highlighted how important that engagement is.

I do not want to give you the wrong data, and I am happy to rectify any mistakes if I am wrong, but I think that there was a lot more participation in the most recent election for the chair of court than there had been in previous years. It is not a silver bullet, because it does not fix anything, but, if staff and students understand the importance of the chair of court, election is a good thing.

Willie Rennie: You could argue that the election of the chair of court at the University of Dundee was part of the problem. How do we know that we will not return to such a situation? The evidence that we received from Amanda Millar was appalling. She had no idea what was happening at the university. Surely that is not a good example of the democratisation that you are talking about.

11:30

Melissa D'Ascenzio: Those are two slightly separate issues. The candidates are vetted by committees and the selection panel, so we cannot vote for just anyone, and staff cannot nominate people who they would like to run for the chair of court. The choice is restricted. Possibly, we should have a conversation about whether there should be more staff participation in the selection process for candidates; that is a fair point.

The democratisation of the system that I am talking about relates more to the university's deanship, vice-principals and chancellors. Having someone come in from the outside with their own biases and potentially very little understanding of the institution, including its strengths and weaknesses, is difficult, as dealing with that takes time. The top leadership has changed frequently in the past year, and we as union members have heard many times from those who have come in, "I'm sorry—I am just finding my feet. It is my second day and I don't really know about this." That has been repeated over and over with all the churn in interim leadership positions. At the time, we needed someone who would hit the ground running.

The democratisation of the system is more about what Sophia Woodman was referring to, which involves the academic freedom of self-governance and the idea about being part of the institution—I accept that that has limitations on the talent that can be selected from. That is why the von Prondzynski report does not go so far as to suggest that all the positions should be elected. There were concerns at the time about the quality and type of candidates who would be available, given the challenges with candidates always being internal. I think that it is time to review whether the managerialism experiment in higher education has worked and whether we should go back to having a hybrid system or what it was when we had elected deans.

Obviously, you cannot elect everyone in the UEG; I would like to have a director of people and a director of finance who know what they are doing and come from professional backgrounds. In fact, at the University of Dundee, we are seeing a reversal of that. The restructuring into faculties was sold to staff as something that might not save us a lot of money; it was positioned as a matter of representation and voices so that the faculties would all have vice-principals on the UEG. However, instead, we can see on the ground that the group has another four mouthpieces that are going into faculties and telling staff why their feedback is wrong.

Stewart Forrester: Let us be honest—it is an old pals act and a case of, "You vote for me and I'll let you into the chair." I am sorry, but they know who will be in the chair. We voted in our two places. The university put up two candidates and the principals encouraged us to vote for the person who would become the chair, because that person knew all about the university and would look after it.

Sophia Woodman: I was going to say something about our university senate. The requirement for elected membership has made a difference, but it has been an enormous struggle with a culture of managerialism. The senate has also not been listened to when it has made determinations. As I said at the start, the vote of no confidence in the management's financial proposals has not been responded to, so there are challenges.

There is also a problem with internal faculty self-governance below the level of the university court and senate.

A big institution such as Edinburgh university needs multiple layers of faculty self-governance. Leaders at college level and at school level have management committees and so on, but there are no real structures of representation that have that kind of faculty self-governance at their heart, which is a serious problem.

I was in London yesterday talking about a different topic, and a friend from Belgium said that they elect their VCs and, as Melissa D'Ascenzio said, they also elect sub-level people such as deans and so on. That would be a positive thing, because it would mean that they had a level of accountability to colleagues and a requirement for openness.

Willie Rennie: My question was really a supplementary to Paul McLennan's question so, unless Mr Cutts has a particular point to make, I will hand back to Mr McLennan.

The Convener: Before we do that, I have a supplementary to Willie Rennie's supplementary. The Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016 stipulates that there cannot be elections to the chair of court position unless there is more than one candidate. Ms D'Ascenzio, your submission says that part of the problem at Dundee university was the number of interim positions. We were told by the interim principal and vice-chancellor that he had been in post for longer because he could not get a full-time chair of the court to start the process to get a full-time principal and vice-chancellor, so this all seems to be getting muddled up in the process. Is the specific requirement of the 2016 act that there must be more than one candidate a good thing, a bad thing or something that you do not have much of a view on?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: You cannot pass a judgment in principle. It is a good thing to have more than one candidate in an election, and I would challenge anybody to say the opposite.

The Convener: But if you cannot get the candidates and if it means that vacancies are being kept open for longer, someone who really does not want the job could put themselves forward so that there could be an election to get over the barrier. Should that barrier be there in the first place?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: We resolved that issue in Dundee in the end. There were three candidates, they were all appointable and staff voted for the best candidate, so we will see whether that has worked.

I appreciate that things were delayed in Dundee, but that does not mean that the interim chair could not have initiated the process of recruiting a new principal while a new chair of court was being selected. I would reject that argument.

Sophia Woodman: I would like to raise a different point about the chair of court. Some people may recall that, during Covid, we had a marvellous chair of court, Debora Kayembe—a human rights lawyer who did a great job of reaching out to staff and students in difficult times. Getting somebody like that is great, but how many people can take on an unremunerated position? She did not even get an expenses allowance and she was supposed to go around representing the university, which was a real challenge.

There is a question about the way in which the structure of these positions excludes people who are not independently wealthy or retired or whatever and who cannot take time to do such an onerous job, especially in difficult times. The unions at Edinburgh have asked about that, because the candidate pool becomes very small when good people who might do an excellent job are excluded because there is no remuneration at all—not even expenses.

The Convener: Thank you. We will go back to Paul McLennan.

Paul McLennan: That question generates some food for thought for us all.

I want to take a slightly different tack. We had some feedback about organisations' ability to implement the changes in the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill. What are your views on the bill? What are the opportunities and risks? It is a separate issue from the one that we have been discussing, but it is important. I acknowledge that it only relatively recently passed stage 3, but what are your initial thoughts on it?

Sophia Woodman: It is such a recent bill that it is hard to take a view. I cannot say a lot, but I can say that I thought that it was a missed opportunity to address the governance issue. However, the bill's focus on more funding, and the expansion of the role of the SFC to broader issues, is really welcome and positive.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: You referred to some feedback that the committee had received—

Paul McLennan: There were concerns in the sector about implementation of the changes, especially at a time of financial uncertainty, and that they would put a bit more pressure on universities.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I am unclear about how the implementation of the bill crossed paths with the financial issues. Perhaps you could clarify that. You may have specific feedback that you would like us to comment on.

Paul McLennan: It is nothing specific; it was just general feedback. That is fine, though.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: If the University of Dundee can engage in massive restructuring at a time of financial difficulties, it can implement the requirements of the bill.

Stewart Forrester: All universities are saying that they are financially broke. They will always say that until they get a financial settlement from the Government, they cannot implement everything that they are asked to implement. It is a catch-22 situation.

Paul McLennan: I do not know whether there has been much discussion with the trade unions about the bill and its implications. Dan Cutts, do you want to comment on that? Was there enough discussion with you about the bill?

Dan Cutts: UCU submitted a number of recommendations, but I do not know exactly what was picked up and what was not. It is good that these issues are being discussed. I am a pessimist, but I will wait and see how it works out.

George Adam: I would like to ask about the organisations' income generation and financial stability. According to the UCU, the trade unions have highlighted that staff proposals for income generation have not been considered. Could you give specific examples of a time when that has happened and demonstrate how such proposals would help with sustainability and creating income for the university?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I am happy to go first, because we did that work at Dundee as part of the taskforce that was led by Sir Alan Langlands. We had a workshop on income generation, which I was fortunate enough to attend. We considered the listening exercise and the responses that the union received from staff as part of the taskforce workshop. The vice principal for enterprise and economic transformation, Dr David McBeth, who led the workshop, said that, in a series of instances, the university seemed to lag behind the sector on income, one of which was continuous professional development. It seemed that university was making only 2 per cent of its total research income from CPD, when there were examples of universities in which that figure was 20 per cent or 50 per cent. Dr McBeth said that the university was missing a trick in that sense and

that we could develop CPD to generate income. He identified the expansion of consultancy work as a point that could have been addressed.

11:45

Staff had loads of suggestions not only about new courses and potential new student markets but about better use of conferencing facilities and having a better strategy to profit from hospitality. Unfortunately, in the past few years, there has been a push towards outsourcing a lot of services, including hospitality services, and that has harmed the university. If the university provided a hospitality service, schools and directorates would spend their events budgets, which might have come from a funder, on that university service. Outsourcing such services means that money goes outside the university instead of being recirculated internally. A similar example is the outsourcing of the electrical team.

There were suggestions for how to reduce costs for the university and how to grow income. I accept that none of the suggestions will solve the problem with the deficit at once, but, if we have a portfolio of suggestions, we can definitely generate enough revenue to address at least the bulk of the deficit. Half of the deficit has already been addressed by staff reductions through the voluntary severance scheme.

We could not verify the numbers, so we do not know how much has been saved as a result of colleagues having left the university through retirement or resignation. We learned the numbers only in November, through the principal's correspondence with the committee. As a union, we had been asking for those numbers for months, because we knew that, on the ground, it felt that we were losing a lot of colleagues and that it was impossible that we had lost only 200 or so.

All those suggestions have been made, but it was really disappointing that, although some of the ideas were included in the narrative section of the university's recovery plan that was submitted in August, they did not make it into the budget. The university is not serious about those suggestions if it is just saying that it is looking at and exploring them, because, as I said, we do not have a lot of time. The Scottish Funding Council gave us a two-year grace period in which we would not become insolvent, so we need to start the work now. As Sophia Woodman said, income from recruiting new students, opening new markets and developing new programmes will take a couple of years to materialise, and the SFC funding gives us the time to do exactly that.

However, the university's management has prioritised a restructuring of the university—we have doubts about how much money that will save—instead of putting all its eggs in the basket of producing more growth for the university. Next year, with inflation of 2 or 3 per cent, between £6 million and £10 million will be added to the university's costs. Where will that money come from? If we do not have a growth mindset, we will enter an endless spiral. Will we lose more staff? Will we lose another 100 staff next year and another 100 staff the following year? Where will it stop?

Stewart Forrester: My university made a £35 million profit from hospitality and conferences—it cost us £80 million in the first place, but we made a £35 million profit. We also had too many tradespeople coming in, so our other biggest saving has come from trying to keep that work in-house. Tradespeople coming in cost the university a fortune, so most of the work should be done in-house. However, the university says that it cannot pay for the overtime at weekends when the work should be getting done, because students are not there, so it is a vicious circle. That is the way that we have explained savings to the university.

George Adam: That is the same argument that Melissa D'Ascenzio made: if you make the investment, you will probably make savings over the longer term.

Sophia Woodman: Our university management has not systematically asked for input on income generation or, more crucially, savings. The staff have lots of good ideas about how to reduce costs. If there was more trust in those ideas, and effort made to collect them, a lot of value could be gained. Some of the university's systems are very clunky, and we are still suffering from the very poor decision making on the people and money system, which cost a great deal of money and good will and which harmed the university's reputation. It still takes a disproportionate amount of staff time to carry out simple processes. Things like that could be addressed, and there is a lot that staff could feed in.

An issue that has not really been raised with the committee is that cuts cost money and restructuring is expensive. Last year, the university spent £18 million on paying off staff to leave. The university is spending a great deal on hiring change managers and on management consultancies—£250,000 went to one management consultant in part of 2025. A lot of money is going into cuts that could be used to address some of the issues, with staff, in an environment of greater trust.

George Adam: The SFC has asked the university to

"Develop and execute a plan to deliver a University Strategy which can demonstrate appropriate and concrete engagement with staff and students".

From what I have heard today, that might not necessarily be happening.

I have a fair idea of the answer that you are all going to give to this question. I was struck by Sophia Woodman's point that regular engagement does not always mean meaningful engagement. That is the important point in all this. With the idea of income generation and, in particular, financial stability, surely if you had meaningful engagement, you would have the opportunity to come up with ideas, propose things and be part of the solution, rather than being seen by management as part of a problem.

Dan Cutts: I will quickly give some background. Income generation has been key to what a number of units and schools have had to do at the University of Aberdeen. When the modern languages situation happened in 2023, my excellent colleagues there set out ways in which they could increase revenue, but they were kind of caught off guard. We were told a few weeks before that there would be no compulsory redundancies, and then everything changed—all of a sudden letters started flying in and the change had to be very quick. When we are talking about income generation, that is on top of what everyone is doing anyway. People work towards income generation anyway, but then you get sudden shocks and are told, "You have to do this now."

That is exactly what we had in May last year. Five schools were identified as needing to make savings or increase revenue, so everyone in those schools set about coming up with ideas and plans to do that on top of their existing workload, which was extremely challenging. They came up with numerous ideas, but the university rejected them all, so all that effort and work was gone.

It goes back to a point that you mentioned in your second question: we need to have trust. We need to be able to trust that, when we come up with ideas, the university will facilitate and support their implementation rather than just saying, "No—it's not going to bring in enough money quickly enough." With all the plans that people had to come up with and all that effort, the money had to land the next year, so if an idea had a two or three-year timeline to make a return, it was not accepted.

To go back to my earlier point, we need long-term thinking. The year-on-year idea and the obsession with individual deficits will not help, because these things take time, especially if you want to start new programmes and diversify the portfolio of courses. That cannot be done quickly.

The feeling was that everyone was being set up to fail. How could we possibly achieve savings without some miracle fund that we could access through a perfect application? It is a key issue. If there were proper engagement and discussion, we could all agree on the journey that we want to take as an institution, which would help with such things.

At the moment, all that comes from the top is that we need to resize and rationalise. A lot of marketised terminology comes from the senior management team at Aberdeen. They use various phrases such as, "We are a complex business," which I dislike, because we are not a business—we never have been and we never will be.

Stewart Forrester: At my work, the approach has changed. Management invite the unions in on a Wednesday, tell us that six people will go on the Monday but that that is private and confidential, and they then go and tell the six people on the Monday that they have consulted the unions. That is the way that they act: they say that they have consulted the unions just because they have told us what will happen.

We have now changed the culture a bit at the university—we took a grievance against it because of the way that it was treating people at work. People were getting a wee tap on the shoulder or being asked to go in for an interview on Friday, then told to leave their laptop and badge on the desk—without even being given a chance to say goodbye to anyone on Monday. That is how bad it got in the university, so we have had to change the culture. If the university had already made its mind up that a person was going, that person would go. It would even give them voluntary redundancy or say, for example, "There are five people in this department. Choose among yourselves who wants to take it."

Management would choose the individual person, and we have found out that most of the individuals who were chosen had a long-term sickness or a disability. We are looking at that just now, so that we can take a case out against the university.

Sophia Woodman: One of the things that has been missing at Edinburgh—this may also be the case at other institutions—is any proper modelling of what the impact of the cuts will be on income. The unions have said all along, "Actually, with this level of cuts you are likely to depress the university's income. How are you modelling that?"

At a previous meeting, I think that Douglas Ross asked whether there had been any modelling of those matters at Edinburgh, and the answer is no. Has there been any modelling of the impact on the city of a large reduction in Edinburgh's staff base? No. The cuts proposals come out of nowhere and seem to be in fashion among VCs. They are ill thought through, cost money and often do not need to happen at all.

George Adam: This probably sounds like I am going off on a tangent, but it ties in with what Stewart Forrester brought up. Union submissions to the committee have stated that some staff have found out about job losses via the media. How can we avoid that in the future and reach a point at which people are not being tapped on the shoulder and such matters are dealt with properly?

Stewart Forrester: When the university took our pension off us, we asked it, "Is this the last stage or are you going any further? Have you got a wider plan? Let us know now and we can help you on this journey." It just put blinkers on. Three unions gave the university the opportunity to work together with them. They said, "Tell us what is going to happen. Who do you think you are targeting and how can we get around this so that we can put a case forward?"

Instead, what happens is that the university turns in on itself and decides that that is the way that it wants things to go until, six months down the road, it is reined back in again. It is only when it is reined back in or questioned about why it is doing something—or we threaten them wi strikes or the law—that the university sits up and takes notice again. The university is totally on its own—if it thinks it can get away wi it, it will get away wi it. That is the difference with universities.

Sophia Woodman: I know that the complaint raised by George Adam has been directed at Edinburgh—I can imagine where it comes from. I guess that the problem is the lack of proper parameters for meaningful consultation. Often, decisions are made to close particular units. I will give an example. In the autumn, the University of Edinburgh had a consultation on job losses at the institute for academic development. It involved quite a small number of jobs, and I am glad to say that most people were internally redeployed or decided to leave—although how voluntary that was, I do not know. In that case, management had already taken the decision, before the consultation even started, to close a unit that many university staff thought was very valuable and that provided a service for the development of staff and students across the institution.

12:00

In addition, consultation periods are too short; I believe that 45 days is a statutory minimum, and we think that it should be longer—more like 90 days. Long before issuing at-risk letters or entering a formal consultation, management should be saying, "We're considering closing this institute. Would you like to suggest alternatives? What do you think?", but that did not happen.

In that context, you sometimes have these things happening. It is about excessive levels of confidentiality and a lack of parameters for meaningful consultation.

Willie Rennie: I am really worried about universities in Scotland. The situation is at near-extinction status for some of them. We saw that with the University of Dundee. I have met, on their doorsteps, Dundee staff who live in my constituency over the water in Fife, and they were visibly upset. There was a cloud that was not disappearing above their head—it was there for months and months on end. This is real.

The Scottish Funding Council's report from September last year was really stark. It highlighted "increasing staff costs"—despite what we have heard today—along with

"Further flat cash settlements or unanticipated public spending cuts … An uncertain macro-economic outlook, including rising inflation and persistently high interest rates … Continuing high energy costs"

and "Infrastructure pressures", including RAAC,

"impacting on the delivery of high-quality learning, teaching and research".

It also highlighted

"The requirement to invest in the achievement of public sector net zero targets"

and

"The impact of UK government policies on"

immigration and international students. Each one of those is significant on its own, and all the measures that I have heard this morning are not the big answers. I am hoping that the review by the partnership between universities, the Government, the union and students will come up with big solutions, because everything that we have talked about today will not plug that gap.

Where are the big answers? Does anybody have them this morning? If we just carry on as we are, micromanaging a potentially catastrophic situation with a funding system that the previous Government minister, Graeme Dey, acknowledged as broken—it is a big deal for any Government minister to acknowledge that a system is broken—I am really worried that some of the institutions might disappear. Does anybody have any big answers this morning?

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I might not have a big answer, but I have opinions and I can share those. I am worried about universities in Scotland, but I am also worried about universities in the UK. Looking a little bit wider, I note that a recent article from Times Higher Education predicted that 45 per cent of all universities in England would have a deficit this year.

There are wider questions to be answered. What is the value of higher education? How much are we ready to invest in it to ensure that future

students in Scotland will have access to a suite of courses that are not just about skills and being ready for the market? Will they have access to the arts and the humanities but be able to become scientists if they want to?

I am a scientist myself, and I would definitely encourage that kind of career path for people who want to become doctors, nurses and so on.

What is the value of higher education? Although it is important to consider the funding model, if universities are struggling there is also a question to be answered by the Scottish Government and the UK Government about how much they are ready to put into the sector. Another article from Times Higher Education—this month, I think—predicted that the sector has already lost more than 10,000 jobs across the entire country and will lose 10,000 jobs every year from now on. Are we prepared to allow that?

You can tell by my name that I am not from the UK. I came to the United Kingdom because of the relevance and prestige of higher education in the United Kingdom and Scotland—our sign to the world. In any other sector, Governments would be stepping in and putting a plug in such a crisis. The situation is not sustainable.

Willie Rennie: Miles Briggs, Paul McLennan and I were at the Educational Institute of Scotland's hustings for schools last Thursday evening. The EIS wanted £1 billion. You are asking for more public money today. When I go to the housing conference next week, which will be dealing with the housing emergency, the participants there will probably want a similar sum. The economy is not exactly booming just now, however. Where does the money come from? I do not disagree with anything that you have said about the value of universities—and they are a flag to the world—but we have lots of difficult, terrible choices to make.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I would not want to overstep the mark and get into a political argument about what the priorities of the country should be.

Willie Rennie: But you are.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I would make a case that higher education should be pretty high up at the top of the priorities just now.

Stewart Forrester: The British Government has just announced that it wants universities to open places abroad: it is encouraging universities to open campuses in other countries. Why not invest the money here in Britain, where it should be going? We have opened places in Dubai and all these places, but why should we be doing that? We might get money in the end, but the point is that we are spending wir own universities' money to do something abroad. Opening a campus abroad stops the students coming here. It is a vicious circle.

Sophia Woodman: This is obviously a complex issue, and it requires a rethink of what public finance does and where it comes from. Indeed, that applies to finance in general. There are lots of people thinking about that.

Higher education is a common good, and it should be preserved as such into the future for the people of Scotland. Research and the various forms of education are an investment in the future. Universities are also a key element of local communities. Somebody else talked about cold spots, and we need to think about how institutions have a multiplier effect on local economies.

Willie Rennie: I could go to every other conference, and participants would say exactly the same thing—on housing, or on school or nursery education, for instance. People in every sector would say that, and everyone would be correct. If the institutions do not exist tomorrow, they will not be able to do any of that work. What are the more immediate, tangible improvements and solutions that we need to find? I have not heard any this morning.

Stewart Forrester: You have to invest in education to start off with, because education is the backbone of Britain. Most students put more money into the economy than anybody else—as a student and when they graduate and are going into the economy. If you do not invest in students, you are not investing in our economy.

I also think that you should bring everybody back to work. I am not being rude, but I just think that everybody should go back to university and go back to work, which would bring the economy back into place, with the money being spent in shops and on buses and other transport.

Something has to be changed. We have sat back and not even looked at education for a long, long time, and that is coming back to bite us. Everybody has taken their eye off the ball with universities because they think that universities are an authority on their own, self-governing and self-funding. However, that has now been disproved. There are no foreign students, and there is no money—there is no nothing—and everybody is in crisis now. We have to stop the crisis by investing. If we do not invest now, you will have a bigger crisis on your hands.

Sophia Woodman: At Edinburgh, we have witnessed an enormous amount of wasteful spending. Reining that in through better governance procedures would mean that we could do more with the resources that we have.

Willie Rennie: Is that really the big solution, though?

Sophia Woodman: I am talking just about Edinburgh. I am not an economist, but I think that other economic models could be explored. For example, some people are talking about education bonds. I do not know whether such a system could work in Scotland, but alternatives are being proposed by some people who work on higher education finance.

Willie Rennie: I do not want to dominate the discussion, so I will now go to Dan Cutts, if that is okay.

Dan Cutts: I completely accept the complexity of the issue, and I would love to be able to give you a direct answer to resolve it, but that is why we are here—because it is such a complex issue and needs unpicking.

The key point to understand is that all the staff at the institution are working as hard as they can to generate revenue and keep delivering the services that the students want and need. Everyone is working over and above that, but we all need to work together in a number of ways. You will have noticed today that there is a lot of conflict; the trade union experience of engagement with senior management teams is not healthy and is not going to help us to move forward.

Willie Rennie: Even if you had the best relationships in the world, would that really plug the financial gap? Let us say that relationships were outstanding and that there was a real partnership across the board. Would that, in itself, solve the problem?

Dan Cutts: No, but it would help to relieve it. It is not going to be resolved in that way, unfortunately. I cannot see that happening.

Willie Rennie: Convener, I do not want to take up more time, as we are overrunning the clock. I ask the witnesses who want to come in to keep it brief.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: I will be very quick. You said that you have not heard answers today, but what answers are our vice chancellors and principals offering? Are job cuts, course closures and less educational provision in Scotland the answer?

Sophia Woodman: Other European countries do it. There are plenty of alternative models for the Scottish Government to explore.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): We have heard quite a lot of back and forth this morning. I will try to pull things back to one of the principal issues that we have discussed, which is the situation at the University of Dundee, the Gillies review and the learning that came out of that. What are the key lessons learned, and have they been taken cognisance of? First, I will ask the question about Dundee in particular to Melissa, then I am interested in the wider lessons for the sector.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: Thank you for the question. The main takeaway from the Gillies report is that the crisis at Dundee was as much a financial crisis as a governance crisis. I am trying to make it very clear in my answers today that the University of Dundee was very successful at the time when the crisis happened. We should have had plenty of cash resources.

The University of Dundee does not have much debt, because we never really used the revolving facility that we used to have with—I believe that it was the Bank of Scotland; I do not want to be incorrect in that. Effectively, what happened is that the leadership did not have proper oversight of the financial costs of capital expenditure and the potential deficits that were created by increases in the costs of energy, staff and so on.

The big takeaway from the Gillies report is that governance is the key and that we need to address that first. Addressing the financial issue without addressing the governance issue that created and enabled it will bring us back here in the next few years; it will not solve the issue. The frameworks were in place for management to adhere to and, clearly, they were not adhered to. That is the main takeaway.

12:15

Has the governance issue been fixed from our perspective? No. As I have just explained, even the university executive group's action plan, which was created to respond to the Gillies report, was not that effective. As colleagues have said, setting up town halls to tell staff what you are going to do is not meaningful engagement. Meeting with unions and having only verbal updates or not really taking on any of the comments or the suggestions that are made does not really address the issue that Gillies had identified regarding dissenting voices.

I am a senator. In the process of the reappointment of the interim principal, there were two meetings of senate—a formal meeting and a special meeting afterwards. The minutes of the special meeting identified the comments of individual senators on whether the principal should be reappointed.

Issues remain with accepting criticism and constructively working with staff and the unions, despite the changes in senior management that we have seen so far. We remain hopeful that, with the further changes that are coming down the line, the issue will be addressed. However, at the moment, from our perspective, it has not.

Paul O'Kane: Okay. You said that there was a mixture of financial and governance issues and that those two things were interlinked. Are the solutions to that interlinked? This morning, we have had a lot of discussion about how those with oversight are appointed or elected, but the sense is that there is no clarity on whether amending that would fix the problem. The view, I think, is that anyone who is dealing with billion-pound budgets must have some financial training or expertise.

It would not be fair to ask you for the one thing that would make the difference, so instead I will ask what the principal governance change would be that could make the difference at your institution.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: Having a more democratic structure would make the difference, as would having more transparency. I have tried to get across the need for a more democratic structure with very clear representation. Take the faculty restructuring. Originally, each of the schools would be represented on the senate, with multiple senators for each school depending on staff numbers in those schools. With the new faculties, we have no clarity on whether that representation will be shrunk to perhaps only four senators.

On transparency, when senate is meeting and taking a decision, how did we arrive at that decision? When court is making a decision, how did it arrive at that decision? What discussion took place? It is extremely important to address some of those issues, because some things that might have slipped in the past will not slip if they are a matter of public record.

Paul O'Kane: Even taking into account this morning's discussion about whether having an elected chair worked or made the difference—or generally makes the difference—your view is still that having a more democratic structure would fix some of the problems.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: Yes, absolutely. Our view is that having a more democratic structure will address at least some of the challenges. Also, it will make the senior management more accountable to staff and students.

Paul O'Kane: That is interesting.

I will widen out the discussion and ask what we can learn from the Dundee example. I think that when she was at committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills referred to Dundee as a fairly isolated case, or was trying to present it that way. Is your view that this could happen in other institutions? What is your key takeaway? What must be learned from the Dundee example in order to fix things?

Stewart Forrester: Can I come in on that one? My boss, the new principal, does not look at the report, which does not affect us because we are not Dundee. That is what he told the unions. The report is there, but it is not for them, because our university has sounder finances and it disnae bother us. That is his opinion because we are our own institution. We need to get universities away from thinking that they are their own institutions so that they start listening to what people have to say. According to him, that report is okay, but it does not apply to us.

Paul O'Kane: That is interesting.

Sophia Woodman: We have talked extensively about transparency and I have said that one of the really key problems at Edinburgh has been excessive capital spending. There is now a huge depreciation charge every year and staff and students will be paying that for many years to come.

We have not really seen changes following the Gillies report. There has been one thing, which is great, which is that some staff representatives on the court are a little less scared about having conversations with unions to collect opinions. That is important because they should not be scared. They are trustees, not reps, but they are, in some cases, elected by the trade unions, or by the senate or whatever.

Much more needs to be done. All universities should say how they are implementing the Gillies standards. Edinburgh specifically has a sort of opaque structure called the university initiatives portfolio board. Those opaque centralised decision-making structures are not accountable, which is really a problem. There is still an extreme level of secrecy about capital projects, with the estates committee and capital projects group, which is responsible for making those capital expenditure decisions, refusing to make any of its papers available since 2021. If you are standing and get re-elected, please call our principal in the next session and ask him about that. We have been asking for months—almost a year—and have got nowhere.

Dan Cutts: I have a couple of things to say in relation to the Gillies report. It seems to have had some impact, because the financial scrutiny at court has increased, which is a positive.

The other side is about challenge and engagement. I said earlier that we are not getting the engagement that we would expect in relation to our current dispute and to the change programme that is coming.

I will go back slightly. In December 2024 we had the Gordon report, which looked at the situation with modern languages at the University of

Aberdeen. I do not know how much I can say, so I will be brief, but the general consensus was that there was not enough listening or engagement. Plans were enacted in a way that created significant problems and caused reputational damage because that situation was not handled correctly. That is another example of what happens when things are decided without people being engaged in those decisions.

Maggie Chapman: I appreciate that I have had quite a lot of time already, but I would like to pick up on some of the points about the Gillies review.

We have spoken about organisational culture and issues of governance and financial management. If an organisational culture is wrong, all the money you want and the best governance structures will not actually lead to outcomes. The Gillies report highlighted that governance frameworks were fit for purpose but that institutions failed to operate them effectively.

My last question is on culture and value. What are universities for? How do we make sure that the value of education is seen as the core principle that drives everybody, from the very top of the university right through the staff structures and students? How do we ensure that the value of education is what matters? Without that key point from Gillies, we are basically just talking round the houses about the issues. A couple of you have said that we will be back here in three or four years' time.

Melissa D'Ascenzio: Yes—sorry, I got lost for a second there, as I would like to give so many answers.

On the Gillies report and culture, we need to think about culture very closely. It is not something that will be changed in six or eight months. Culture is changed through leading by example and leadership. As the three campus unions submitted to the committee as part of our joint statement, the thing that seems to have been lost in this financial crisis and in the attempt to address the deficit, which seems to eat up everything, is the valuing people side of things.

Although staff are keen to work with the university to support its recovery, there does not seem to be reciprocity in that. It was very telling that, when we had a meeting with the principal at one point, we came out of that feeling that we were not in the same business. As unions, we were trying to do as much as possible to save jobs and ensure that our staff wellbeing was safeguarded. On the other side, there seemed to be a focus on cutting the deficit regardless of what happened to staff and to their health and wellbeing. If you acknowledge through the listening exercise that you have a traumatised workforce, why would you not put forward a strategy or action plan to address the institutional stressors that cause that mental health crisis?

So far, all the university has done is circulated a series of emails saying that people can speak to a counsellor and that the university has paid extra for an external counselling service, because its internal services cannot cope with the requests. That is not appropriate, and I would challenge whether it fulfils the duty of care that an employer has to its employees. In the meantime, the university still refuses to rule out compulsory redundancies of staff at the university. It is important that, since November 2024, people have been told, "Your job might be at risk. We don't know when. We are making plans—don't worry about it. At some point we will let you know," or perhaps a local newspaper will publish it. That has been really hard. We have completely lost track of the fact that valuing people is one of the foundational values of our institution.

How do you change culture? The management could come forward and in the first instance tell staff that, because the university has received or is about to receive funding from the Scottish Funding Council, the threat of compulsory redundancy is removed. That would relieve some of the stress among staff. The culture needs to be led by example. That is about the chair of court and the principal interacting with staff in a constructive way, showing clearly that, as the university has said in its action plan for engagement with staff, it will publish information on how staff and student feedback has influenced decisions and outcomes, rather than just collecting feedback, sitting on it and saying, "We will publish at some point."

Sophia Woodman: It is about listening. Our university management has repeatedly failed over many years to listen to staff and unions. We see that again and again, and the consequences are dire. The report to the Edinburgh university court on the people and money system is couched in a certain language, but the implications are clear.

12:30

I would also like some responsibility to be taken. Edinburgh university should not be in the situation that it is in. There should be some kind of humility and account to staff and, as Melissa D'Ascenzio said, people should be valued.

Our principal says, "This is for the future of the university and to sustain its mission into the future." What university? A university is not an abstract thing; it is a complex ecosystem of staff and students with its own particular strengths that need to be preserved over time. I would say to him: you have been given stewardship of a charitable enterprise, the value of which goes well beyond the staff and student body. What have you done

with that stewardship? I would like that question to be answered.

We must also stop talking about the university as a business. Again and again, we hear, "The business this," or, "The business that." Each time, I say, "This is a university, and it is a charity—please talk about it in a different way." However, that culture of talking about it as a business is pervasive. A lot of models are coming in from business that are considered to be efficient, but they are not fit for purpose.

Stewart Forrester: Universities are the backbone of society. A university is like an independent city on its own: if you close a university or let it be closed down, all the shops, pubs, clubs and everything else around it will collapse. You have a duty of care to make sure that the university is open. However, you also have a duty of care tae make sure that the university answers to you rather than be an autonomy on to itself. However, universities are an autonomy on to themselves, and they do not currently need to answer to anybody.

Dan Cutts: I will be brief, because my colleagues have said a lot and said it effectively. The situation across Aberdeen university is similar to the situation with modern languages, which has resulted in people being at risk for an extremely long time—Melissa D'Ascenzio also identified that problem with regard to Dundee university. That takes its toll.

Fundamentally, my worry is that, because of the way in which the marketisation of the sector is operating, we will lose subjects and disciplines, and we will be poorer for it. There was a brief discussion about the UK sector more broadly. However, when people lose their jobs, where will they go in the current climate? That is also an important problem. We have talked about the extent to which job losses at universities will impact the universities and individuals themselves, but there will also be a broader impact on the economy and such other things. Therefore, we must be careful about how we move forward.

Adding to what was said earlier, senior management teams must take some responsibility. We are where we are—I get that—but there were better times when money was not always spent in the best way. That goes back to the point about long-term thinking, which we need more of.

Maggie Chapman: Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you for your time and answers, as well as for your engagement with the committee over previous months and years prior to this meeting. I am sure that that engagement will continue with our successor committee in the next parliamentary session. I thank your members, as well.

12:33

Meeting continued in private until 12:42.

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