

EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Monday 23 October 2000
(Afternoon)

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EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT COMMITTEE

31st Meeting 2000, Session 1

CONVENER

*Mrs Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)

*Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

Fiona McLeod (West of Scotland) (SNP)

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Michael Russell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP)

*attended

WITNESSES

David Caldwell (Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals)

Tony Keeley (Higher Still Development Unit)

Anthony McClaran (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service)

Paul McClure (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service)

Mary Pirie (Higher Still Development Unit)

Professor Joan Stringer (Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals)

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

David McLaren

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Education, Culture and Sport Committee

Monday 23 October 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting in private at 13:43*]

14:20

Meeting continued in public.

The Convener (Mrs Mary Mulligan): Good afternoon. Before I welcome the representatives of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service to the meeting, I ask committee members to agree to start Wednesday's meeting in private at 9.30. Are members agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That gets the practicalities out of the way.

School Exams

The Convener: I apologise for the delay in starting today's meeting, but I am sure that the witnesses appreciate that the committee needed to deal with some business. I welcome members of UCAS to the meeting—they have had a long journey and I thank them for their efforts. The committee has received copies of UCAS's written submission. Mr McClaran will introduce the other two witnesses and we will then move to questions.

Anthony McClaran (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service): Thank you. On my right is Paul McClure, who is the head of application services—the department that is responsible for operations at UCAS. On my left is Ross Hayman, who is director of corporate communications at UCAS. We are grateful for the opportunity to attend this afternoon's meeting.

I have only one brief statement to make at the beginning. We have been asked by many colleagues at UCAS to pass on to the committee their sympathy and condolences on the loss of Donald Dewar.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

First, can you or one of your colleagues give the committee an update on the position concerning university entrants?

Anthony McClaran: On students who are Scotland domiciled, the number who have found places in higher education in Scotland has increased by 7.8 per cent from the 1999 figure. The number who have found places in higher education in the UK has increased by 7.2 per cent, which compares with an overall 2 per cent rise in the number of students finding places in higher education. This year, we have had the highest number of admissions into full-time HE since the previous high point in 1997.

The Convener: We will move on to some of the difficulties that UCAS experienced and how the organisation dealt with them.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I thank the witnesses for their helpful submission, in which it was observed that there was no independent quality control system. What system should be put in place to ensure independent quality control in Scotland?

Anthony McClaran: A number of options could be considered, but I do not think that UCAS has the monopoly of wisdom on or insight into that matter. Structurally, it would be good practice to have an independent quality control mechanism. The English and Welsh systems use intermediate bodies that are responsible for quality control, but which are separate from the examining bodies' functions. It might be worth considering such a model.

Furthermore, there has been talk in the press of appointing an exams tsar, who would have the authority to intervene if it was felt that quality was being threatened. That idea might also be worth consideration. As I have said, UCAS has no special insight into the matter, other than to observe that robust quality control would be a good idea and that that is a feature of most systems of this sort.

Cathy Peattie: I accept that you might not be able to go into the details of such a mechanism. However, who should be involved in such a body? Who would the stakeholders be and how would they represent education as a whole?

Anthony McClaran: Any quality control body might include professionals who were involved in the day-to-day work and a board that consisted of stakeholders in the system. The examinations system has many stakeholders. We are conscious that higher education represents only a part of the total number of users and stakeholders in the exam system. Clearly, a quality control body would need to be broader than that.

Ian Jenkins (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I was interested in the comment in your submission that you were not necessarily criticising the higher still programme, but that you felt that

“the examining and certification process is so complicated, that perhaps it was introduced a year too early.”

You also mention that you want certain changes to be made in the way in which information is sent to UCAS, because it is unlikely that individual pupils will understand fully the system through which they are being examined. That suggests that the system is over-complicated. At the stage at which UCAS deals with matters—when certificates are issued—are you interested in unit passes, core skills and so on? Would UCAS prefer to see an indication of the final result in the significant examinations, accompanied by a profile or reference from the school?

Anthony McClaran: Ian Jenkins raises several points that need to be disentangled. UCAS has had an entirely constructive experience of working with the Scottish Qualifications Authority in the development of higher still and the new qualifications. The UCAS Scottish office convened the subject panels that considered many aspects of the higher still curriculum. We have been involved in the process and we are delighted that, for the first time, a point-score system has been achieved, which embraces the new Scottish qualifications. Under the new UCAS point-score system we have, for the first time, a UK-wide system. That has been extremely positive.

In our operational discussions with the SQA last year—without making any judgment on the curriculum—we were concerned about some of the complexities of reporting. In particular, we feel that it is essential to keep the reporting element as simple as possible, as long as that does not distort any element that is central to the curriculum. We anticipated at the time that there would be difficulties relating to results.

What higher education wants from the Scottish qualifications is a matter for higher education, rather than for UCAS, which is the servant of HE institutions in that respect. Those institutions are not seeking some of the detail that has been proposed and which, in our view, would have made the system excessively complicated.

Ian Jenkins: Thank you.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): It is difficult to work out how many students were disadvantaged this year. Page 6 of your submission states that

“numbers of students in Scotland trying to get a place outside Scotland on the basis of Highers”,

through clearing is rather small. Could the witnesses give the committee a rough figure for that? Are we talking about hundreds or thousands of students? We would like some sense of the numbers of students who have been affected by late entry to clearing.

Paul McClure (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service): I have some overall figures, but the situation is very complex. I can provide the committee with figures relating to applicants who we coded as taking either highers or certificates of sixth year studies. The total that was coded for that cohort was 18,816. Of those applicants, 13,351 were placed at their first choice institution, 1,084 were placed at their second choice institution, 1,015 were placed in the UCAS clearing system and 3,366 were not placed. We cannot draw any conclusions about the applicants who were not placed—they might have chosen not to enter the clearing system.

Mr Macintosh: How do those figures compare with those of previous years?

Paul McClure: We have not done such a comparison, but we could provide the committee with that information at a later date.

Mr Macintosh: That would be good. At the end of your submission, you mention a total of 10,300 amendments. Am I right in saying that that refers not to 10,300 students, but to 10,300 amendments, some of which would apply to the same student?

Paul McClure: That was the figure at the time that the report was written. The current figure is 18,400 individual result amendments.

14:30

Mr Macintosh: A particular problem that was mentioned was the fact that students who wanted to get into medical and dental courses had to apply by 15 October 2000. That problem was not stressed to the SQA. Can you update the committee on that? Do you know whether any students were adversely affected?

Paul McClure: We gave advice to schools and colleges in Scotland that any student who was completing their UCAS form for entry in 2001—particularly those who were aiming for a medical or dental course—should make clear in their application form any results that were subject to appeal.

Mr Macintosh: How many students have been affected by that?

Paul McClure: We do not have those figures. The applications for 2001 entry are paper based, so we do not yet have those data.

Mr Macintosh: Normally, if a pupil had missed the application deadline, would they be able to appeal to UCAS?

Paul McClure: They might come to us for advice, but normally they would get advice from their schools or from colleges. I hope that any student who is applying for medicine or dentistry

courses for entry in 2001 will indicate on their UCAS application form whether any of their higher results are subject to appeal and I hope that they will not be disadvantaged.

Mr Macintosh: I understand that it is difficult for you to provide hard statistical information, but would you say that you are not being inundated with inquiries?

Paul McClure: Since we issued that advice, we have not been inundated with inquiries, or other indications of concern, from Scottish applicants.

Anthony McClaran: We should also add that we raised with the SQA our concern about the earlier deadline for students who were applying for medical and dental courses. We understand that priority was given to appeals from students who were in that position. I hope that that helped to resolve that situation.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): I want to return to some of the points that Ian Jenkins raised. You say in your paper that you think that higher still was

“introduced a year too early”.

Do you think that that early implementation might have contributed to the problems that we encountered this year?

Anthony McClaran: It is difficult to give a definitive answer to that until we know what the cause of the problems is. All that we know is what the problems that we experience are. Perhaps a year's further testing of the systems that were being used to implement the new arrangements might have been useful. Some of the bugs that led to the large-scale loss of data might have been resolved in that period.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have never been able to get my head around the idea of tsars. From newspaper reports, I understand that there might be a qualifications tsar. Could witnesses help me by explaining what such a person would be able to do that an eight-cylinder minister for education could not?

Anthony McClaran: I hold no particular brief for the appointment of a tsar, but people who argue for a tsar, or for an independent quality control body, talk about the advantages of having an intermediate body between the Government and the body that is responsible for exams. They argue that, if there is no intermediate quality control mechanism, quality problems might not be discovered in time and that any problems that occurred would have an immediate political impact, although they would not necessarily be resolved at that level. I imagine that a tsar would be reasonably expert in relation to the issues that surround the administration of large-scale public

exams and would be able to intervene early.

Mr Stone: This might be commenting on the matter in a sideways fashion, but does what you have said to the committee suggest anything about the way in which the board of the SQA was chaired?

Anthony McClaran: We cannot comment on that—we are not privy to information about the SQA board or how it was chaired.

Nicola Sturgeon: I want to ask about communications with the SQA prior to the issuing of exam results. I note from UCAS's paper that you first raised with the SQA the issue of the timeous issuing of results at the end of June. What prompted that?

Anthony McClaran: That was prompted by rumours—through reports in the press and anecdotes from higher education institutions—that there might be problems and delays in the issuing of results. The concerns were vague at that point, but they led us on 29 June to seek reassurance from the SQA that there was unlikely to be any delay in the release of results, which were planned for the weekend of 5 and 6 August—a date we had previously agreed with the SQA. We were assured on 3 July that there would be no change to that timetable. We had to accept those assurances.

Nicola Sturgeon: You were due to receive a copy of the results on 5 and 6 August, but by 8 August it had not turned up, which is when you contacted the SQA. At that stage—before the whole situation blew up—what reasons or excuses did the SQA give for non-delivery of the results?

Paul McClure: The SQA said simply that it was having problems with its systems. We were not given any great detail.

Nicola Sturgeon: When were you told the results would appear?

Paul McClure: We contacted the SQA on 4 August. At that stage, we still expected delivery of the results over the weekend of 5 and 6 August.

Nicola Sturgeon: Your paper says that you contacted the SQA on 8 August, which was the day before the results were due to arrive at pupils' addresses. At that stage, did the SQA say when UCAS would be likely to receive them?

Paul McClure: Following that weekend, we were twice promised that we would receive the results before they were delivered. The SQA was obviously having problems—it had difficulty with its systems. It worked through those problems and it got the results to us as quickly as possible.

Nicola Sturgeon: When it became obvious that there was a problem—although you could not have known the extent of it—did you begin to take

any steps—

Paul McClure: We were not aware that there would be any problems with the data. Obviously, we were going to receive the results later than planned, but at that point we were still confident that the data would be 100 per cent correct when they were supplied to us.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Is there anything that UCAS could have done to help if—when you sought reassurance at the end of June—the SQA had said, “Yes, we have a problem here,” or was the problem compounded by the fact that UCAS might not have been getting the full picture even at that stage?

Anthony McClaran: If it had been clear to UCAS at that stage that there was a problem, it might have been possible to renegotiate the date of release of the exam results. It is not an oddity, but one of the quirks of the system is that Scottish results are released before A-level results. In the past, Scottish students have had an advantage in that they have known their exam results before students south of the border have. There was some time to play with, in which one could have negotiated a planned release of the exam results—say, a week later. It might have been possible to resolve the difficulties in that additional time.

Johann Lamont: When you contacted the SQA on 4 August, was there any suggestion that you would not receive the results on 5 August? I am trying to find out the extent to which anybody who came into contact with the SQA—even at that late stage—heard an admission that there was a problem. Am I right in thinking that UCAS had to contact the SQA on 8 August to ask for the information that it was expecting, and that the SQA did not contact UCAS to explain—

Anthony McClaran: I think that that is correct.

Paul McClure: Yes it is.

Anthony McClaran: That is the position—we contacted the SQA. As we entered that difficult period around the time of the issuing of exam results, there was a problem about obtaining information. That made it difficult to know exactly what we ought to say publicly. We issued a series of press releases—no fewer than six—throughout the crisis, which expressed our best understanding of the position. However, we were not always able to be clear about what the next few stages might be.

Nicola Sturgeon: This question is about the future—witnesses may wish not to give an opinion. You said that, in terms of university admissions, there is no real reason why Scottish results should be issued earlier than A-level results. Given that the higher still exams come later in the academic

year, is there an argument for delaying the issuing of the results and bringing them into line with the issuing of A-level results?

Anthony McClaran: I can give only a partial answer to that question. From the perspective of one who is involved in running the national higher education admission system, one can see a number of options for dates. Other factors will also be important, so I would not presume to comment on what dates should be chosen. The Scottish examination system must serve the needs of a number of stakeholders—we would not want to argue that the system ought to be run purely for the convenience of admissions into higher education.

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes, but would adding a couple of weeks to the timetable cause UCAS any difficulties?

Anthony McClaran: I do not think that it would.

Paul McClure: Adding a week to the timetable certainly would not cause us any difficulties, but adding two weeks might.

The Convener: How might that cause difficulties?

Paul McClure: If the results were issued two weeks later than they are currently, that would be more or less a week later than the current A-level results issue. The timetable is built on the release of A-level results.

Cathy Peattie: I am sure that witnesses would agree that it would have been better for the results to be two or even three weeks late this year, in order to have avoided the fiasco that occurred.

Paul McClure: Data that were 100 per cent correct—even if they were received five or six weeks later than they were expected—would have been better than only partially correct data that were delivered on time.

Anthony McClaran: It could be dangerous to set future timetables purely because of what happened this year. We received amended data right up until 13 September, so the problems went on for a long time. The situation this year has been highly abnormal and, as it turned out, having even an extra week would not, in retrospect, have been tremendously helpful.

The Convener: What kind of problems were caused by the fact that you were receiving amended data until 13 September?

Anthony McClaran: I can give one very positive response to that: it did not cause any problems with the transmission of results to higher education institutions. We received 13 separate releases of amended data from the SQA and we were able to turn those corrected data round to all the higher education institutions within—in most cases—24

hours.

The randomness of the changes caused uncertainty. We were not dealing simply with the correction of results—there were missing results and results that were amended more than once. However, the system worked in terms of transmitting the results to universities and colleges.

The Convener: Were students disadvantaged?

Anthony McClaran: That is difficult to answer. As the process went on into clearing, there was the potential that students might be disadvantaged through not being on a level playing field with students who already had their full results. However, if one considers the final position, one sees that record numbers of Scottish students have been admitted to higher education. The probable reason for that is the attitude of the Scottish higher education institutions, which decided, by and large, to give the benefit of the doubt—where any existed—when admitting students. The fact that the process is funded is also important.

Cathy Jamieson (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab): Some young people in schools in my constituency have asked whether what you have just said is true across the board. Some of the more competitive courses would have been more difficult to get into, and some students have said that they have been disadvantaged. Is it possible that—although there might not have been problems with some courses—some students who wanted to get into courses where there was more pressure for places have not had the opportunities that they might have had?

14:45

Anthony McClaran: That might be the experience of some of your constituents, but we have not seen direct evidence of that.

Cathy Jamieson: Is there any way to assess that objectively?

Anthony McClaran: The figures that Paul McClure read out indicate that, of the 18,000 students we are talking about, 13,000 were placed at first-choice institutions. That is a high percentage to be placed at first-choice institutions and that is reassuring. However, more than 3,000 students were not placed, for one reason or another. We do not know why that is, so there might be scope for more research into why those students were not placed and whether they were disadvantaged.

Cathy Jamieson: Young people have expressed concerns that there will always be an element of doubt about this year's exams and that colleges and universities might still put a question

mark over them. How can young people be reassured that they have been admitted to courses because they merited their places? How can young people who have not got into courses be reassured that they have not been unduly disadvantaged?

Anthony McClaran: The first rather narrow point that I must make is that UCAS cannot give that assurance. We are not the examining body and we do not know whether the marks are finally correct. Ours is a system that transmits marks—as they are given to us—to higher education institutions to enable them to make their decisions.

On a personal note, perhaps it is too utilitarian to focus simply on grades as a way of achieving entrance to higher education. Young people everywhere want to be assured that they have received the correct academic recognition for the work that they have completed. Clearly, it must be a major objective to try to restore that sort of credibility.

Mr Stone: UCAS has gone back to higher education institutions several times with new information from the SQA. Given UCAS's unique role in being able to consider what has happened, and taking on board what happened regarding A-levels, are you in a position to speculate on how higher education institutions might perhaps reconsider evaluation procedures for the future? Might there be ramifications for the way in which higher education institutions consider qualifications in years to come? Are you prepared to do some crystal-ball gazing into a matter that will be pretty crucial for future generations of pupils?

Anthony McClaran: When it comes to crystal-ball gazing, it is rather hard to look beyond the results of this and the other inquiries that are being conducted. It seems that everything hinges on whether the inquiries can determine accurately which systems failures, or other failures, caused the problem. If the inquiry reports show how those problems can be addressed, there is every prospect—all other things being equal—that the system will enjoy full confidence. Academic quality is not in doubt; everything hinges on our being able to say definitively what went wrong and how that can be addressed, so that we can rebuild credibility into the system.

Mr Stone: Do you think that if, God forbid, we do not restore credibility to the system, the HE institutions might get shirty and proceed rather differently in future?

Anthony McClaran: I cannot speculate on that. Are you asking what might happen if there were another year of uncertainty on the scale that we have seen this year?

Mr Stone: I wonder whether, if there was continuing uncertainty, HE institutions would do things differently, in terms of evaluating would-be entrants and administrative processes.

Anthony McClaran: Those institutions would, I suppose, adopt ad hoc measures if they did not have sufficient information, as they did last summer in trying to seek reassurances directly from the schools that the young people had attended. However, I am sure that one would not want that to become a permanent situation.

Nicola Sturgeon: Paul McClure read out figures that illustrate how many students have been placed in first-choice institutions. I assume that that does not necessarily mean that they were admitted to their first-choice courses.

Anthony McClaran: The first-choice institution is defined as the conditional offer that the applicant has firmly accepted—the applicant's first choice from the range of offers that they originally received.

Nicola Sturgeon: Does that also mean their first-choice course in an institution?

Anthony McClaran: Yes. The definition is based on the specified courses that were applied for. We can assume that, in the majority of those cases, the candidate will be allocated their first-choice course at their first-choice institution.

Mr Macintosh: We spoke about quality control mechanisms. Does UCAS have a quality control mechanism that will be able to pick up what might go wrong in future? Obviously, it was difficult to pick up what went wrong this year—UCAS picked it up anecdotally. I assume that several mechanisms will be put in place to improve quality control, but will UCAS have such a mechanism?

Anthony McClaran: We can make a contribution. UCAS and its predecessor organisations have been running a national HE admissions system since the early 1960s. For the larger part of our history, that has been a computer-based system. We have necessarily gained—sometimes painfully—a huge amount of experience in administering large-scale systems such as this and in examining the interface between school and college qualifications and entry to higher education. If we could contribute some of that expertise as part of quality control, we would be delighted to do so and would have a strong contribution to make.

Mr Macintosh: That is an interesting suggestion.

Ian Jenkins: I would like to return to the point about moderation and quality control. Until this year, a methodology of concordancy and marker checks—which seemed to work—existed in the Scottish exam system. It appears not to have

worked so well this year. Much of the moderation of higher still that was meant to have gone on has been moderation of the internal assessments, which ultimately do not affect the end grades hugely.

Would you like to say anything about that? I take it that previously you had confidence in the moderation systems and the quality control. How can that be re-established with such methodology?

Anthony McClaran: The moderation system for qualifications is beyond our competence. Our discussions with the SQA focused on what is within our competence—the method for ensuring the effective transfer of reliable grades to the higher education institutions, which must make admissions decisions. Matters that concern moderation and internal and external examination of the qualification are beyond UCAS's remit.

Ian Jenkins: We talked about the complexity of the system. Do you value the establishment of Scottish group awards?

Anthony McClaran: As they are new, the value of Scottish group awards will be determined by the value that higher education institutions place on them. Our experience this year has been that HEIs have not, by and large, expressed offers in terms of group awards, but in terms of grades for higher subjects. We will facilitate the accurate transfer of whatever information HEIs decide that they need to make their admissions decisions, and we will work with HEIs and the SQA to do that.

Ian Jenkins: The group awards system is not implemented fully, but I wonder whether it provides another unnecessary layer of elaboration.

The Convener: That was the final question.

I thank the witnesses for their attendance and for answering members' questions—even those that dealt with subjects that are outwith UCAS's remit. It is useful to get everybody's views on some of those matters.

14:54

Meeting adjourned.

14:59

On resuming—

The Convener: As everybody is back in position, we will make a start. I welcome the representatives of the Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals—we are grateful for their time. We have copies of their written submission, but Mr Caldwell or Professor Stringer may wish to add to that now.

Professor Joan Stringer (Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals): I have nothing to add to the submission at this point, other than to say that we welcome the opportunity to assist the committee's investigation.

Along with potential students and their parents, COSHEP was distressed by the events that took place in the summer. However, we stress to the committee that, as the written submission indicates, COSHEP's involvement and contact with the SQA are rather tenuous. The SQA is an extremely important organisation to us, as we need to have accurate data at the right time, but our involvement is rather indirect. Our aim, like the aim of the committee, is to ensure that this matter is examined and that recommendations are made to ensure that whatever problems occurred this summer do not happen again.

The Convener: Absolutely. In your written submission, you say that you might want to add to what you said about the appeals process, as the situation is on-going. Is there anything that you would like to add?

Professor Stringer: Could you point me to the relevant page of the submission?

The Convener: Unfortunately, it does not have page numbers, but the relevant part is at the top of the fourth page.

David Caldwell (Committee of Scottish Higher Education Principals): Our concern was the large number of appeals, which was much higher than ever before, and the consequences that that would have. At that stage, we did not know the number of people who would have to be admitted late to institutions. In fact, as the committee has just heard from the representatives of UCAS, the number of Scotland-domiciled pupils going into higher education has reached record levels this year. That has happened for a variety of reasons. A contributory factor is that a lot of people were admitted late because their appeals were successful. However, the sector has managed to accommodate them.

The Convener: Thank you. We will move on to other questions.

Cathy Peattie: I note that you have no desire for the SQA to be incorporated into the civil service. Why do you think that it should be an independent organisation?

Professor Stringer: That view emerged from consultation with COSHEP members, but was not backed up by much detail. However, I believe that it was felt that the SQA's professional accreditation function was not simply administrative and should be undertaken by members of the wider academic community, which could best be done at arm's length.

David Caldwell: I am sure that the other underlying consideration that our members had in mind was that it is a good principle for judgments on whether academic standards have been satisfied to be made by a body that enjoys a degree of independence.

Cathy Peattie: There has been some discussion about the establishment of an intermediary body and an independent quality control system. Do you have a view on that? If there were such a body, who would be involved?

David Caldwell: We are fairly agnostic about that. Speaking personally, I tend to be against arrangements that are excessively complex. None the less, quality assurance is an important matter and we need to have systems in place that ensure that whatever the SQA—or a successor body—does, it is robust, stands up to scrutiny and can be subject to independent verification if necessary. However, I am not sure that COSHEP would want to commit itself to supporting any particular mechanism.

Cathy Peattie: Clearly, the public have concerns about quality assurance within our exam structure. What can be done to reassure the public—young people in particular—that they should not give up?

David Caldwell: The best thing would be to ensure that things are right next time and that there is no repetition of what happened this summer. It is worth emphasising that a great deal was got right this time and that what was being attempted was ambitious—perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight, too ambitious in some respects. You are right that it is important that we should give the maximum reassurance to the young people and their families who suffered uncertainty this year. That is what matters; it was what motivated us in the higher education sector to reassure those young people who were contemplating entry into higher education.

Johann Lamont: I am interested in the points that you make towards the end of your submission about how the situation should move on. You highlight the late processing of higher national diplomas and higher national certificates, which struck a chord, as the issue was raised with me locally—people felt that we had not heard what was happening to HNC and HND students. Could you expand on what you think has happened, or what you understand the current situation to be and how it has impacted on those students?

Professor Stringer: As far as I am aware—David Caldwell may have better statistics—only a small number of higher education institutions, perhaps four or five, offer HNCs and HNDs. I do not think that there has been a particular problem in higher education institutions in respect of those

awards.

David Caldwell: I think that that is correct. However, an increasing proportion of entrants into higher education are coming with HNC and HND qualifications, so we were concerned that, if the problems with the highers and standard grades had a knock-on effect on HNCs and HNDs, that could impact on entry into higher education. Although we do not have hard data, there is little evidence that the effect on HNCs and HNDs was significant this year. The problems were primarily to do with the highers results.

Johann Lamont: Nevertheless, in your written evidence you say that there is evidence that there were delays in processing. Those delays would have had a significant impact on students, particularly as the situation was not highlighted.

David Caldwell: The delay was unhelpful. The point that must be made strongly is that higher education admissions offices are always working under tremendous pressure during August and September, when they have to handle a large number of complex cases in a short period of time. Any delay is unwelcome and the delay in the highers results was unwelcome this year. Similarly, the delay in awarding HNCs and HNDs was a problem, but it was on the whole dealt with successfully. However, we hope that the situation does not recur. It is much better when results are published timeously and on the dates on which they were expected.

Johann Lamont: The committee will, at a later stage, want to look at the impact of the problem on people who were using HNCs and HNDs for purposes other than accessing higher education. Do you feel that the delay has been overcome?

David Caldwell: I cannot comment on cases other than those for entry into higher education, but we did everything that we could to ensure that no intending entrant into higher education was disadvantaged because of the lateness of their results. We very substantially accomplished that.

Nicola Sturgeon: I want to pick up on something that you say in your written submission. Like everybody else, COSHEP was misled by the SQA right up to the point at which the results were due to be issued. By that time, confidence in the SQA was diminishing rapidly. However, on 13 August you felt able to issue a statement jointly with the SQA, in which you said that you were satisfied that the problem was one of missing data, not inaccurate data. How did you go about satisfying yourself of that, given that by that stage nobody had much confidence in anything that the SQA was saying?

David Caldwell: As I was the person who put COSHEP's name to the joint statement, I will deal with that question.

I want first to respond to the suggestion that we were misled by the SQA. "Misled" is perhaps the wrong choice of word, as it suggests a deliberateness that I am satisfied was not there. We were led to believe that the problem was on a much smaller scale than turned out to be the case. That happened because the person who passed on the information to us—the then chief executive of the SQA—genuinely believed that his information was correct. There was no question of his misleading us. We received an estimate of the situation that, sadly, turned out to be an understatement of the real extent of the problem, which proved to be considerable.

I do not have a copy of the joint statement that was issued after the meeting on Sunday 13 August, but I can give the committee an account of what happened, which will confirm that at that stage we were not absolutely confident that missing data were the only problem. On Sunday 13 August, the SQA officers told us that they believed that it was very probable that the only problem was one of missing data, but that until they had carried out a series of validation checks over four days they could not guarantee that.

Based on that information, the following morning I sent a circular of the highest urgency to all COSHEP members, in which I suggested that they consider suspending making offers to candidates who were providing SQA results, because until the validation checks were completed it was not certain that the only problem was one of missing data. That reflected the position as outlined to us on the Sunday. The SQA officers said that they believed, and were reasonably confident, that missing data were the only problem. However, because they had experienced serious problems, they felt that they needed to carry out a series of rigorous checks. Until those checks were complete, they would not give a guarantee that missing data were the only difficulty.

The validation checks that were carried out on the first day led the SQA to conclude that the problem was indeed limited to missing data. That was confirmed by all subsequent results.

Nicola Sturgeon: Given that account of the situation on Sunday 13 August, do you accept that in putting your name to the statement that was issued you were risking making the same mistakes that the SQA had made? By putting your name to something that you were not sure was an accurate reflection of the situation, were you not running the risk of increasing confusion by giving out information that quickly turned out not to be accurate?

David Caldwell: I would not and did not put my name to something of which I was not sure. I took a cautious line and advised our institutions that they should seriously consider suspending making

offers of admission to candidates who were applying on the basis of SQA results.

Nicola Sturgeon: It was reported widely that you were satisfied that the problem was missing data, not inaccurate data.

David Caldwell: If the statement was reported in that way, it was not wholly accurately reported. I would not have given the advice that I gave to our members the following morning if I had taken that view.

15:15

Nicola Sturgeon: You have answered my next question, which was going to be whether COSHEP is satisfied that the problem was with missing, as opposed to inaccurate, data.

David Caldwell: Yes. All the evidence points to that. There were quite a lot of missing data and, although we should not understate the seriousness of the problem, we should not make out that the problem was something that it was not.

Nicola Sturgeon: In your view, do the institutions have confidence in the quality of this year's results? Aside from the problem of missing data, do the institutions have the confidence in the accuracy and quality of this year's marks that you would normally expect?

David Caldwell: I have every reason to believe that to be the case, but Professor Stringer, as principal of one of those institutions, is in a better position to add to my reply. All the feedback that I received is that the institutions have every confidence in the quality of the students that they admitted this year. They treat the admissions process extremely seriously. You ought not to underestimate the additional effort that was made to consider cases in the light of the problems that occurred this year.

Professor Stringer: My institution was not alone in its approach to the situation. We were concerned to take into account a number of factors. Because we wanted to ensure that students were not disadvantaged as a consequence of the situation, we extended the admissions period. In fact, we stopped taking applications from prospective students only in the past few weeks. We devoted a lot more resources to the admissions process.

In general, we were satisfied that the problem was with missing, as opposed to inaccurate, data. We are now trying to verify the information internally, through our course leaders, who collect and verify information on the offers that were sent out to students. My institution, among many others, had to start processing admissions on the basis of the results that students expected, rather

than on the complete results. We are now trying to calibrate those two approaches. The early indications are that we do not have a significant problem. We anticipate that only a few students have been admitted with lower grades than might have been expected and we will take special measures to help them through their programmes, particularly in the early stages.

Mr Stone: I want to check out a statement in the last paragraph of your submission. You say:

"Above all, COSHEP believes that all of Scotland will be harmed if the reputation of the Scottish education system was damaged."

To some extent, COSHEP can take an overview of the situation, given the organisations that you represent. You go on to say:

"However, some indicators—such as the 15 per cent drop in applicants from England to Scottish institutions—are not promising".

I want to be certain in my mind what you mean by that. Are you saying that there has been a drop in confidence in school qualifications, which leads to a loss of confidence in qualifications from higher education institutions? If so, I would like to know why that should be the case. I suggest that the drop in the number of English applicants could be linked to the fact that courses in Scotland last four years, whereas in England they last three years, which means that students would face a further year of tuition fees.

The press has mentioned the figure of 15 per cent quite a bit in recent weeks—it causes us all anxiety. Could you flesh out the statement that you make in your submission?

David Caldwell: You ask a very good question, and I wish that I had a definitive answer to it. The truthful answer is that we do not yet know the reasons for that decline, which is sharper than one would expect in a single year. There are obviously year-to-year fluctuations and, as ever, we ought not rely too much on one set of figures. None the less, the drop from last year of 14.9 per cent in the number of students from England being admitted to Scottish institutions causes us concern.

The existence of four-year degrees in Scotland and three-year degrees elsewhere in the UK should not make a great deal of difference to what has happened this year, as it has existed for a long time. However, it can be set alongside the introduction of tuition fees, particularly the fact that students from other parts of the UK now pay three years' tuition fees for an honours degree programme—they would have paid for four years of fees but for the Scottish Executive's action in response to the Quigley report. The factor perhaps comes into play, but it should disappear again because of the fact that the Executive exempted students from other parts of the UK from the fees

for the fourth year of study in Scotland.

Mr Stone is right to say that tuition fees could be a factor in the fall in the number of students from England—the SQA business may have nothing whatever to do with it. We require research to uncover the exact reasons for the decline. In mentioning the SQA, we were simply saying that, when there is adverse publicity about some aspect of the education system, that may rub off on other parts of the system, however unfairly. I believe that it is in the interests of the whole Scottish education system for all its parts to be seen to work effectively.

Ian Jenkins: I wish to repeat a question that I asked earlier in the meeting. You said that you did not like overelaborate systems. Do you believe that the higher still system of assessment is overelaborate? Does the reporting system—the stuff on the certificate at the end of the process—include material that is not necessary for your purposes? I realise that you are not the only stakeholder in or receiver of the system, but could the results set-up have been simplified or streamlined with a different form of assessment?

David Caldwell: You are right to say that we are not the only user of the system, so we would not like to determine what should be on the certificates. I am no expert on the detail of what is certificated and why. In general, however, I am a great supporter of the new type of certificate. It provides much more information than ever before about a candidate's qualifications. It also means that individuals will increasingly be able to carry with them a single certificate that attests to all the lifelong learning that they have accumulated.

One important initiative that the higher education sector—along with the other sectors of education—has been happy to be associated with is the development of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework, which assists with the interfacing of the various levels of education and allows candidates to move from one level of study to another without wasteful loss of time. That is why I generally welcome the SQA's development of the new kind of certificate, which represents an important step along the way. However, we may need to re-examine it to see whether improvements are possible.

Ian Jenkins: That is a powerful defence of the system, but I think that you would agree that it ought to be comprehensible and easily understood.

David Caldwell: Absolutely.

Mr Macintosh: Do you know how many institutions have taken advantage of the relaxation in the numbers and the financial limits covering the intake this year?

Professor Stringer: I am not certain that what is happening is about taking advantage of the relaxation. The data will soon be available, probably later this week or early next week. My institution has recruited 5 per cent above the funded numbers that we have been given. The relaxation was 4 per cent; unintentionally, we have gone a little over as a consequence of not wanting to disadvantage students. I do not think that COSHEP has collected or collated the statistics.

David Caldwell: The statistics have not been collected, but the UCAS figures indicate that the number of Scotland-domiciled students who have been accepted to Scottish institutions this year is 7.5 per cent higher than it was last year. That implies strongly that several member institutions will have to take advantage of the greater flexibility that has been provided.

This is not an unmitigated benefit to the institutions. The committee must appreciate that relatively small amounts of additional resources go into the institution for the students. The additional funding, which it receives from the awards agency, is £1,050 per student. The full cost for a full-time student is, on average, about £5,000 per year. The institutions have been glad to help in this way. From the beginning of the crisis, we thought that the most important thing was to do everything that we could to reassure the applicants and their families that nobody would lose out in relation to higher education because of the problems at the SQA. The institutions have taken on a significant number of students over and above what was originally planned.

Mr Macintosh: The UCAS figures show that admissions were up 7.2 per cent and 7.8 per cent in England and Scotland respectively. What was the planned increase in student numbers?

David Caldwell: We expected a much more modest increase, in the order of 1 or 2 per cent.

Professor Stringer: A long-term funding issue is built into that, which I hope the Executive and the funding council will address at the appropriate time. Those students will have to be carried through the system for three or four years, potentially without the additional funding to support them.

David Caldwell: We ought not to see this as a problem. One could argue that it is a great benefit that this year we have been able to admit a higher percentage of young people in Scotland into higher education. Although we have a remarkably high participation rate in higher education in Scotland, there is capacity to extend it still further, especially in social groups that have been under-represented. The increase may partly have come about by accident this year, but we should rejoice in the fact that an historically large number of

young Scots has been admitted into higher education.

Mr Macintosh: I do not mean to overelaborate the point. I agree that we should welcome the expansion of higher education and that there might be potential problems with funding; I am more concerned about who is being admitted into university and under what criteria. Is this situation a one-off, or will it be repeated year on year? Perhaps Professor Stringer might know from her institution whether the extra number of students being admitted this year would have been rejected in a normal year.

15:30

Professor Stringer: The problems at the SQA have not been as direct a cause of the extent of the overshoot as we might at first assume. However, the situation does have something to do with those problems. Institutions have fairly narrow targets and are usually extremely good at hitting them. This year, we overshoot the targets to some extent because of the uncertainties and the institutions' desire not to disadvantage students. We are still collecting information on this issue, but I would think that very few—if any—of the students who were admitted will have done so with lower than appropriate grades.

David Caldwell: When they take decisions on admissions, institutions are heavily influenced by the test of whether a candidate has the capability to complete the course successfully. Our success rates matter a great deal to us. We should be relatively happy that the success rate of students in Scotland is as high as it is in the rest of the UK, even though we have a much higher participation rate. Our institutions will certainly want to maintain that very high rate of success.

We are not talking about a significant number of students getting into the system without the necessary qualifications; the majority of these candidates should be capable of meeting the demands of the course. As Professor Stringer said, we work within planned student numbers and we hit our targets very reliably because there are financial penalties for taking too many students as well as for taking too few. Perhaps, in some years, candidates who are capable of higher education are not able to get into university simply because of the limit on numbers that has been set.

Mr Macintosh: I should stress that I was not so much concerned about the academic qualifications dropping off as about being fair to students across the board. It is not necessarily the case that, under the current system, all students from all backgrounds will have fair access to higher education.

Nicola Sturgeon: I would like some clarification on funding the relaxation of the overshoot—and apologise for asking this question in quite simplistic terms. Will the relaxation of the overshoot have financial implications for institutions that might not be fully funded? Will institutions be financially worse off because they are taking in more students this year?

David Caldwell: Unfortunately, the situation is more complicated than that, as it almost always is. We should recognise that there is a difference between average and marginal costs. It is not necessarily the case that, in taking a small number of additional students, institutions will incur costs at the same rate as the average cost of educating a student.

The point that I was making is simply that the amount of additional resource per extra student that we receive is rather small. Institutions are able to cope, but they are not enjoying any financial benefit as a result of the situation; they are getting a rather modest increase in financial resources in return for an increase in student numbers.

Nicola Sturgeon: In real terms, institutions are financially worse off because of the additional students.

David Caldwell: That is difficult to measure. The institutions are receiving some additional income. In that sense, they are not worse off. However, there are also additional students. The actual cost of looking after those additional students is quite difficult to compute.

Professor Stringer: The effect will be to depress slightly the average cost of taking each student through their programme.

Nicola Sturgeon: Does that have any real-terms implications for students? If the notional average cost is depressed, does that have implications for the service the students are offered by the university?

Professor Stringer: It should not. My institution has considered the matter very carefully. As Mr Caldwell has pointed out, those additional students bring some funding, although it is marginal. All institutions should be able to cope with the situation but, as ever, we would like to receive more funding for each student.

The Convener: Is that okay?

Nicola Sturgeon: It is probably just my innumeracy, but I am not clear on that point. Perhaps we could get more information on that. Could you give us a written briefing on the surrounding issues?

David Caldwell: We could provide an additional written statement, although it would not take us much further forward. The basic difficulty lies in

calculating the exact additional cost of taking five more students on one course, eight more students on another and so on, spread over many different institutions. The case that I am arguing is that where there is a relatively modest increase in the number of students compared with the figure that was planned, the students can probably be accommodated with relatively modest additions and with no detriment to the quality of education that the students receive. If we were talking about doubling the number of students attending particular programmes, the situation would be entirely different—the whole cost base would need to be re-examined. I am happy to provide additional notes, but I doubt that we will be able to provide a more precise answer.

The Convener: We are trying to ascertain whether there are financial consequences for the institutions which will have a detrimental effect on the students. You seem to be saying that that is not the case, given the size of the increase.

David Caldwell: We will have to examine the situation very carefully. If, when we have the final numbers, we think that the impact on the costs for institutions is greater than was expected, we will draw that to the attention of the funding council and we would expect the funding council to raise the matter with the Executive. However, we are not inclined to argue such a case unless and until we have the evidence on which to base it.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): If you have an increase of approximately 7 per cent this year, instead of the 1 or 2 per cent increase that you might have expected, will we see some strange figures in the few years to come as a result of some kind of compensatory mechanism to make up for the fact that the funding for the huge increase this year will have to be carried into the students' second, third and fourth years?

Professor Stringer: That is partly what I was alluding to earlier, but a definitive answer cannot be given until we have the information about where the students are and exactly how many of them there are. We do not know how much of the increase is attributable to the problems with the SQA and how much is to do with other factors. We want, as Mr Caldwell said, to collect the information. I have no doubt that, in the light of that information, each institution will want to determine its own strategy. I do not expect that that 7 per cent increase will be spread evenly across all institutions. Each institution will have to gauge whether there has been a disproportionate intake in certain areas and whether there has been any distorting impact. Until that has been done, it is difficult to know what individual institutions will do.

David Caldwell: It is important to stress one

aspect of that. I would be concerned if people were worried that, because we have taken extra students this year, the number of places available next year and the year after will be lower.

We have already raised that issue with the funding council, as that body, acting on advice from the Scottish Executive, sets the student number limits. I have every reason to believe that steps are being taken to ensure that the problem does not arise in practice. It might be that we return to something more like the numbers that were previously planned, but the numbers will not be artificially depressed because of the extra numbers this year. Indeed, I am happy to say that, because of the result of the recent spending review, we expect an increase in student numbers. That is good news as it indicates that the opportunity for a higher proportion of Scots of all ages to get into higher education will be further improved.

The Convener: I thank our witnesses for their attendance. We will take a short break while we change witnesses.

15:42

Meeting adjourned.

15:46

On resuming—

The Convener: Good afternoon. I welcome you to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee. You will know that our procedure is to give you a couple of minutes to introduce yourselves. If you wish, you can say a few words, especially given that we have not received a written submission from you. I will then open the discussion up to questions from members.

Mary Pirie (Higher Still Development Unit): I am the chief development officer of the higher still development unit. With me is my depute, Tony Keeley. Ours is a service unit—our job is to support the programme and the direction of various groups in the programme. We have a broad remit, fairly wide contact with the profession and six years' experience of producing the sort of support that teachers, college lecturers and others have asked for. We were unsure what specific questions you would ask, but we came prepared to do our best to assist.

Ian Jenkins: Is it your view that higher still was implemented too early, before you were ready?

Mary Pirie: We heard earlier that there may have been unresolved issues with regard to the SQA's information technology systems, which became obvious only quite late on, but the programme has been running for a fairly long time,

having started about four years after the Howie committee proposals, when there was extensive negotiation about the way forward.

There were four years of consultation and staff development before we implemented the reform. The programme has been postponed twice. It is being phased until 2004, with additional phasing for English and communication, which is a special case. It could be argued that 10 years to implement the reform is not overly hasty.

Our feedback from teachers, schools and colleges was that they were ready to go. We knew that there would be problems in the first year, as there will be with any new system. However, the whole programme moved forward from December 1998, when more important people than me—the major stakeholders—felt that the time was right for that to happen. We supported that.

Ian Jenkins: What would you say to the fact that various people, including many local authority directors of education, have reported that no attention was paid to their concerns about their lack of readiness? There is a feeling that, after you started, you were always running behind time. On the in-service days, for example, people were asking for materials, which were promised but did not arrive on time. It has been suggested that there was a lot of consultation, but in practice people felt that their professionalism was overlooked.

Mary Pirie: I think that the consultation on this programme has been very thorough. It was thorough at the beginning, when we got consensus from the profession on the nature of assessment and the way to go ahead; and it was thorough later on when we consulted about the development and support materials that staff felt they needed. We have exceeded what those people asked for by a considerable amount; we have not just met the minimum requirements.

I take the issues that have been raised very seriously indeed: I am a teacher, so I am concerned that we have quality in the system. Twice each year, my colleagues and I meet 10,000 to 12,000 members of the profession through our staff development events for senior managers and principal teachers. At those meetings, we get formal feedback about how members feel things are going and about what they need to make progress with initiatives. On every occasion, we either act on that information if it is within the remit of the development unit, or we give that information to other organisations.

Once something has been implemented, I am never content just to leave it: we have to be interested in what is happening on the ground all the time. Over the past three years, we have instigated studies in schools on every subject and

on whole-school issues. In those studies, we actively sought out the issues that people wanted to be addressed and the problems they were encountering; we then decided what we or others could do to assist. The results of all those studies have been recorded, are available, and have been forwarded to people.

I would therefore say that it is not accurate to say that we did not pay attention to people's concerns. However, if a concern is an individual concern rather than one that has been generally expressed, it can be difficult to deal with if the general pattern of agreement goes against it. We had to pass information to the management groups for the programme, and we did so. It was for them to decide whether an issue was of general concern and should be acted on, or whether it was a unique concern that should be dealt with differently.

Ian Jenkins: In the consultation meetings, teachers of English raised great concerns about the integrity of internal assessment, the amount of assessment and the validity of some of the requirements. That was three years ago, yet we still have shifting sands. Is that not correct?

Mary Pirie: I would not use the term "shifting sands". You could say either that we did not pay attention and did not do anything about English or that we did pay attention and have moved forward. Views on where English should be going were split: there was never 100 per cent agreement that we should go in one particular direction, although that happened in other subjects where we have had far fewer problems.

There was a professional debate about English. It was right to have that debate. We supported that. We have moved forward and made changes, and the position with English has firmed up a lot. A final consultation is going forward inside the SQA, which will take the profession's views about the proposed assessments on board. As far as I know, the results of that will be absolutely firm. The concerns of English teachers have been taken seriously. We have tried hard to accommodate as many needs as we can.

Ian Jenkins: But it is now three years since the implementation was announced. I do not want to go on too much about English.

On 25 November 1999, you wrote to principals and head teachers about the assessments. You had a strategy to respond to the situation with unit assessments and so on. There is no time to go into all those things, but you were addressing a lot of concerns in November—after the courses had been started in June. I would say that that involves shifting sands, because you were taking into consideration problems that had arisen. The point is that those problems were foreseen. In

November, half way through a session, instructions were being given out and people were hearing that in January they would be told what to do.

On 16 January, you wrote a letter to Alison Taylor, the higher still development officer in Aberdeen City Council, responding to concerns that she had raised in December. That letter is widely considered to be critical of teachers. It is a detailed letter that raises a number of points about individual subjects.

The letter was written in January—half way through the session. It talks about changing when the units are done and looking at what is meant by exceptional circumstances in which things can be changed. It says:

“I cannot be asked to respond on SEED’s behalf . . . I would suggest that SQA would welcome details of your concerns”.

It also says that materials have been provided to schools.

Under the heading “Accounting and Finance”, the letter says that

“minor errors were found to exist within some . . . materials”

and that

“there is always a delay between the publication of paper versions and electronic versions”.

Under the heading “Business Management”, it goes on to say that

“core materials for Higher were not available”

and that

“late draft materials were issued”.

Under the heading “Chemistry”, it says that

“additional questions for Higher . . . that have been developed . . . do not have a marking scheme”

and states that

“since HSDU has no locus in producing external course assessment materials, it would not be proper for HSDU to comment . . . I regret that this might have caused staff to require to adjust some answers.”

The letter goes on to cover other subjects, including physical education and home economics, but I will not go on to mention them all. That letter was written in January, more than half way through the first session. That suggests to me that the new system was not ready before schools started teaching.

Mary Pirie: None of the content of the November letter was new information. That request for information asked us to pull together key messages and publish them so that centres could be confident about going forward based on an established set of rules. That is what we did.

The advice on the assessment, which is what that letter mainly comprised, was welcomed by centres. Thereafter, the amount of reassessment that students had to undertake decreased dramatically. It seems that that letter helped centres to reconsider how best to manage assessment, and they welcomed that advice. The November letter was generally well received as helping centres with a dilemma that they were facing, as they had come across some difficulties when they first attempted to manage the assessments.

You quoted from a letter to an individual council. One of the jobs that I and my colleagues in higher still have is to act as link officers to local authorities. We were aware that, as colleges and schools went forward with implementing higher still, specific issues had to be addressed in different subjects and people needed answers to those queries. Sometimes it was the remit of my unit to work on those issues, but it was quite often outwith my remit to answer such queries and it would have been quite wrong of me to do that. The correct response was to tell people where they ought to go to get help. We were not shuffling off any kind of responsibility; we were trying to give people a lead to where they could get helpful advice.

Following the letter that you quoted from, I had a most useful meeting with the co-ordinator and other members of senior staff on Aberdeen City Council and with the school co-ordinators. One of my jobs is to talk through concerns with school co-ordinators. We had resolved quite a lot of the problems by that response. Far from feeling that it was a slight on them, the co-ordinators of Aberdeen City Council’s schools found it helpful that I gave them that response. It formed the basis for a useful personal meeting and, as a result, things improved in the council, which was my aim.

Ian Jenkins: North Lanarkshire Council has given us a document that mentions the

“pressure to ensure that students are presented for course awards, which means more pressure on *ensuring* favourable outcomes of unit tests.”

It goes on to say that

“pupils are being assessed in some aspects of the curriculum virtually every week . . . the issue of ‘controlled conditions’ is a cause for concern and creates problems of continuity in the teaching environment . . . Unit assessments mean that in many cases, students have seen the part but not the whole. In subjects where assessments are set at minimum competence there remains a significant gap between success at that level and competence at the level of the external examination”.

I realise that people may not think that we are getting to the heart of things here, but the council’s document goes on to say:

“Teaching staff are learning to coach for the test”.

It also states that the system

“does not allow for maturation throughout session”

and that

“Cross-marking of internal assessment is proving time-consuming . . . there is too much paper for both staff and pupils . . . and that needs to be simplified . . . There is a significant lack of exemplars of levels of performance to enable teachers to benchmark standards.”

That letter dates from the middle of the course. I do not want to go any further than that.

I am suggesting that the whole system has been leading to an over-dependency on internal assessment of doubtful validity and that it has necessitated an awful lot of bureaucracy, which has impacted on the SQA; that the situation in schools led to a proliferation of material at the time of the SQA crisis.

I am sorry. I realise that I have gone on a bit.

The Convener: That is your final question, Ian.

Ian Jenkins: I knew that you were going to say that.

16:00

Tony Keeley (Higher Still Development Unit): On the point about giving advice to people during the first year of implementation, a number of issues could not have arisen until the programme was run. For example, we piloted some of the assessment on a small scale, in as wide a variety of schools as we could, but, until the programme was run nationally, it could not be known how it would work. When feedback to the seminars said that the cut-off score in physics, for example, was a bit too challenging, we had a choice: either we could leave that course to run for a year, and cause difficulties for students in that year, or we could respond quickly, which is what we did on several occasions.

Physical education is another good example; classroom teachers had agreed with the original model, which had seemed sensible. However, when we put it into practice, people found that it was over-assessed. We had the same choice: we could change it right away—which we did—or we could put off changing it for the rest of the year, which would have caused more discontent and in the next round of seminars people would have raised the same issues. We had choices in responding to concerns that people raised, which would have been realised only in the course of the first year of implementation.

Ian Jenkins: Unless there had been some kind of piloting.

The Convener: Let Mr Keeley answer, Ian.

Tony Keeley: We piloted some of the assessment with small groups. However, it is not until a programme is implemented on a large scale that a national feedback of people's views is received. At that point there is a choice: put off changing the programme until next August—and let the problems run—or respond, which is what we did. Because the issue concerned assessment, we took it from the seminars back to the SQA and, in consultation with the SQA, came up with what seemed to be a solution in response to what people had asked for. We then passed that information out as quickly as possible, which seemed a fairly reasonable way in which to respond.

We have not come across many people who have argued against the principle of internal assessment, especially those of us who have taught for a long time and have had students go through a course for a year, fail the external exam and have nothing to show for it, although they have learned aspects of the course and picked up some knowledge, understanding and skills. It seems fair to give students recognition for their achievement as they go along, and the only way of doing that is through some form of assessment. We are trying to introduce a model that is manageable, and when we have encountered specific problems we have tried to address them.

Another aspect of internal assessment concerns lifelong learning and the need to break courses into year-long chunks so that people can come back gradually into education. Nobody would disagree with that principle. The concept of internal assessment seemed to be acceptable to people; the difficulty lay in finding a manageable model that recognised and measured the achievement of students. In most cases, that seemed to be the case.

Let me give an illustration from my own subject. The assessment that we proposed for the year's course in science is three end-of-unit tests and three written reports of experiments. That is the basic model. Not many people would argue that that is over-burdensome. However, there may be differences between subjects, and that is one of the difficulties that the first year of implementation is throwing up.

Those are the kind of issues that would be addressed and resolved during the implementation of a new system. Not until the system is running do they become apparent.

Cathy Peattie: Was any consideration given to whether the SQA could deliver the results that you expected?

Mary Pirie: Throughout the development programme, subject groups dealt with the details of where we were going; the SQA was

represented on those groups, along with ourselves. Over the four years that Tony Keeley and I have been in post, as steps have been taken along the way, SQA officers have given us feedback on whether those steps were manageable. That feedback always suggested that they seemed reasonable and manageable—internal assessment seemed eminently so, as it would provide either a yes or no answer.

Data handling on yes or no questions is not usually considered complex. The feeling seemed to be that the SQA could handle the data for internal assessment, which is the only part of the programme about which we know in detail. Those officers were also dealing with what was going on with the external exam, although they did not do so with us. We had to assume that they were balancing all the demands on the system.

There are many places where we meet SQA staff—obviously, we do so during day-to-day work on the programme. All the feedback that we received was that things were progressing and were manageable. Tony Keeley and I, and the rest of our colleagues, were as surprised as everyone else at what happened in August, because we had no inkling that it was in the offing.

Cathy Peattie: Did you have no indication over the spring or summer that things were about to go wrong? I know that you, like others, had been given assurances, but teachers and others have told us that they had concerns.

Marie Pirie: Twice a year we meet school managers from every school in Scotland, and we have groups that advise us on issues that arise. From as early as autumn 1999, school managers told us that they were experiencing problems in registering candidates. Registration was part of the administrative procedures of the SQA, over which we had no remit, but we were concerned—it was not in our interests, or those of anyone else, for students to be placed at a disadvantage.

We raised those issues with SQA colleagues. Moreover, in October and November 1999, we invited SQA directors to give presentations at seminars for senior managers, so that the SQA would hear concerns directly. We thought that it would be helpful to allow senior managers to raise their concerns with the people who might be able to do something about them. SQA directors were very willing to make presentations and take notes at seminars. We, too, took notes at those meetings, which we submitted to the SQA so that it received not only instant feedback but a written record of the concerns of school managers.

In November 1999, we were also dealing with the concerns of principal teachers. We meet the heads of departments rather than every teacher. They began to tell us that, for example, they were

not sure about information about prelims. We received the material to which Mr Jenkins referred. We have a direct line to the qualifications managers group. The field officer team—our colleagues who look after subjects—gave us detailed feedback about the concerns of principal teachers.

We passed on concerns as soon as we heard them, with a view to assisting rather than doing anything else. We also sent the reports of our implementation studies—our field studies, which test matters—to the SQA. We were aware that there were problems. We did not know in detail about problems with external assessment, because they arose later in the session and did not relate to our remit. Where we were aware of problems, we were prompt and—I hope—helpful in telling the SQA about them.

Tony Keeley: We arranged a meeting with local education authority representatives in March, because from working with local authorities we had become aware that they had concerns. That meeting, which was attended by both the SQA and Her Majesty's inspectors, gave local authorities the opportunity to discuss directly with the SQA the data-handling issues that were emerging.

Another area of contact was meetings with local education authorities. We discovered that they were communicating their concerns directly to the SQA.

Johann Lamont: There seems to be a recurring pattern of the SQA being informed of problems. Did you have a role in checking whether concerns had been taken on board? I accept that you told the SQA promptly about concerns that needed to be addressed. Was there any mechanism by which you could check what had been done to address those concerns?

Mary Pirie: The higher still development unit is a temporary unit. Our job ends in June 2001. We are part of Learning and Teaching Scotland, which is a different organisation. It would not have been proper for us to hold anybody to account—it is beyond our competence to do that. That does not mean that we did not have any idea of how things were going. Colleagues in schools and colleges had sought information about, for example, prelims. As the SQA issued amendments and improvements to, for example, cut-off scores, we were aware that it was causing insecurity. Mr Jenkins' point was right. It was reassuring that people were listening and doing something about it. The SQA tried hard to be responsive at that time and we got copies of the letters and question-and-answer briefings that it issued, but we were never in a position to hold the SQA to account. We could only inform the SQA and be reassured when we saw evidence that it was picking up on a number of the problems.

Johann Lamont: So your organisation was reassured that the SQA was responding to concerns.

Mary Pirie: We were reassured on the areas within our remit—the management of internal assessments—in which we were involved with the SQA. In general, when we flagged up an issue, although it sometimes took a little time for it to be dealt with, there was no lack of intention to deal with it. That was our experience.

Johann Lamont: That is your view. It is just your impression that there was no lack of intention.

Mary Pirie: Yes, it was our impression.

Cathy Peattie: Some people say that the past few months have damaged people's perception of higher still. What is your view of that? How can that be overcome?

Mary Pirie: We are about to find out, as we are about to do another round of seminars. We will have face-to-face contact with colleagues in schools and colleges. In June 2000, we had a round of seminars at which practitioners who had taken part in our implementation studies presented how they had found the first year to colleagues from other schools. They were warts-and-all presentations in which people set out the problems that they had encountered, what they had done and what they intended to do next year. The feedback from that round of seminars was the most positive that we had ever had. The feeling was that we were meeting challenges, but were succeeding in getting somewhere.

In June, I went to a school to meet some of the students who were joining higher still and some of the students who were already part of it. They were knowledgeable and were up for higher still now that they knew what it was all about. The teachers gave me the same kind of feedback. What has happened over the summer has been devastating. It can never be repeated.

We have a good system. The higher still development unit has a helpline, which receives phone calls, usually from teachers, but also from other people. One of our measures of how things are going is the number of calls that we receive. The number of calls has gone down in the past two weeks. My feeling is that people are doing a workmanlike job at the moment and awaiting the conclusions of the committees' inquiries.

There is a general sense that people learned a lot last year and were moving ahead. I am terribly disappointed that the events of the summer have cast such a shadow.

Cathy Peattie: Teachers and schools delivered on higher still—there is no question about that—but do you agree that the perception among

students and young people is one of mistrust? Do you agree that those who have another year of exams to sit, or who have just done standard grade, are not confident about going on to do higher? They think that the system will make it difficult to get through and to do assessments. How do we deal with those young people and with the fears of parents about their children's future?

Mary Pirie: The situation can best be dealt with through the schools and colleges, which is where parents and students put their confidence. Working, as we do, on an on-going basis, is the only way to restore that confidence. There must be reassuring messages about administration—absolutely. We need to get the system bedded down and people need to be clear about what needs to be done so that the system is managed in the coming year. However, there are also a lot of students out there who did intermediate and access courses last year, who will not feel that it was a bad year. There will be people who got the units, but not the highers, who will not have thought that it was a bad year. They are in the system too and tell their friends about that.

I am not trying to underplay the challenge and the demands—that would never be my intention—but underlying this is the confidence that the system is better for our students. We have to get past this situation, and get past it together. We have a role to play, but so do other organisations.

16:15

Nicola Sturgeon: I have two questions. First, did the introduction last year of a new exam system contribute to the problems over the summer?

Mary Pirie: The introduction of a new information technology system certainly contributed—

Nicola Sturgeon: I am asking about the exam system.

Mary Pirie: The external exam system used shorter exams than had been the case previously. There were no more exams in the system than there were previously—if there have been problems, I do not understand what they might be.

Nicola Sturgeon: Is your position that there is nothing that is peculiar to higher still that contributed to the problems that were encountered this year?

Mary Pirie: The fact that problems were also encountered at higher and standard grades suggests that my view has reasonable back-up.

Nicola Sturgeon: Does that accord with the views of teachers, pupils and other people whom we have heard evidence from: that what we

encountered this year is not independent of the introduction of the new exam system?

Mary Pirie: One cannot say that there will be no problems when a new system is introduced, a new body is created and a new IT programme is initiated. I would never be naive enough to say that. However, the new exam system was not an outstandingly important contributory factor.

Nicola Sturgeon: It was a factor, however. My question is not designed to have a go at you; I am just trying to tease out whether there were aspects of the implementation of the new exam system that you think—with the benefit of hindsight—might have contributed to the problems.

Mary Pirie: I did not think that you were having a go; I thought that you were seeking clarity. Your question is more for the SQA than for me—in a sense, the administration of the exam system is within the SQA's expertise, not that of the higher still development unit.

Nicola Sturgeon: With respect, it is not a question for the SQA. The SQA can answer questions about the administration of the exam results. I am asking a question that should properly be directed at you. Does anything connect the introduction of a new exam system—for example, the change in examination timetables and the assessments, and the fact that that led to a higher volume of material for the SQA to deal with—and the problems that were encountered? Are there aspects that might have had a bearing on those problems?

Mary Pirie: They would have had little impact. For example, senior managers were consulted on the timetable and they said that they could live with it. When recording accomplishment of course units, the input is a yes or a no; it is not a large input into the electronic system. External examinations were no different from past examinations. In terms of the references that Nicola Sturgeon gave me, the impact of the new examination system was small.

Nicola Sturgeon: Given the problems that arose with higher still in its first year—I am not talking about the SQA problems—that Ian Jenkins talked about, and given that, as has been argued before the committee, some of those problems were flagged up well in advance of higher still going on stream, what changes is your temporary organisation making to the way in which you will communicate with and liaise with the teaching profession over the next year of higher still, to make sure that its concerns are fed directly into your processes?

Mary Pirie: The development of the national liaison group has been helpful. It brings a wealth of information to the programme. The higher still development unit works directly with all

stakeholder institutions—such as local authorities—and will continue to do so. We will continue to run staff development, to meet practitioners and to run programme implementation studies. We will also continue to use the professionals who advise us on what is needed in different subjects. There are ways in which we can improve matters and there is no question but that we will do so.

Nicola Sturgeon: What are those ways?

Mary Pirie: We can examine the feedback that we have received. Feedback has come into the system since June and we are working on that with our partner organisations. That feedback includes feedback on changes to assessment and additional support materials.

There is a work plan to be worked on and it was always going to be that way. That is not a new addition to the system. We always knew that we would have to go on working, particularly on the advanced higher this year.

Tony Keeley: The implementation studies for each subject have been and will be helpful. In each subject, a number of schools agreed to work with us and to tell us how the first year went—what went wrong and what went well. We have produced reports that are based on that information, indicating where people have found solutions to the problems that have been identified. Those reports have been distributed to departments for the coming year.

As Mary Pirie said, some of the teachers who were involved in those studies talked to their colleagues at the seminars that we organised. We have been picking up issues and feeding them back to schools. Students complained that they had too many assessments at once, for example. Some schools have found ways of avoiding that by spreading out assessments, but not all have. We have taken examples of good practice and passed them on to all schools, so that people can learn from them.

Nicola Sturgeon: One of the up sides of what has happened is that the problem has highlighted certain issues. People are saying that in future, the exams should be held earlier in the year rather than later, as they were this year. There is also a heated debate about the future of internal assessment. Does the higher still development unit have views on any of those issues?

Mary Pirie: It is outwith our competence to take a view on when exam diets should take place. Rightly, that is a matter to be decided by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, in negotiation with the stakeholders.

The benefits to students of internal assessment are manifest. Anyone who is in the system can

see them. However, we can find ways of making internal assessment more manageable and serious consideration will be given to achieving that. However, we will continue to support the general principle of internal assessment—it is a policy of the programme and one of our jobs is to support it.

Cathy Jamieson: I refer—not entirely at random—to submissions to the committee from two local authorities in which I have an interest: East Ayrshire Council and South Ayrshire Council. Both authorities pick up the fact that, at various stages, problems were flagged up. That point has been made repeatedly during the inquiry. The problems related both to the materials that were—or were not—being provided and to the assessment programme.

You have said that you now recognise that some work needs to be done in those areas. East Ayrshire Council states:

“There is a need to clarify the policy on reassessment”.

That council indicates that some students are having reassessments after the external course exam has taken place. The council also feels that there should be a review of the entire internal assessment process. Similarly, South Ayrshire Council states:

“A review of the Higher Still assessment arrangements should be carried out. The current system needs to be simplified.”

The clear view of students who have been through the process is that the level and timetabling of assessments, the timetabling of exams and some of the other uncertainties have made the educational experience less enjoyable than it might otherwise have been. They felt that they were under additional pressures. Do you have any comments on those points? Can you say something about the good practices that solved the problems that some schools had with the assessment process? Given that many students are in the middle of that process, how can we ensure that the same problems do not recur this year?

Mary Pirie: Your first point related to materials. We regret that any materials arrived late. Undeniably, some materials arrived close to, or after, the date on which they were needed. However, most of the materials that were needed to implement the first year of higher still were available at least six months—and sometimes a year—ahead of when they were needed. All the support materials that are now in the system from our unit—which does not include the national assessment bank—are listed in our catalogue. There are more than 1,000 items—there is a great deal of support in the system.

Teachers have told us that they need time

before using those materials to go through them and to decide how best to incorporate them in their teaching. None of the materials is compulsory. If teachers prefer, they may use existing materials that they like.

One lesson for the programme came from an important point that was made by teachers—they need time with existing and new materials to marry those and to produce good educational experiences for their students. The way in which the materials have been adopted has far exceeded our expectations, especially in relation to subjects such as modern languages, where the materials have been welcomed.

There has been an enrichment of the learning and teaching experience—which was also borne out by HMI inspections. I do not think that assessment absolutely overwhelmed the learning experience of students—there has been good learning and teaching this year.

An example of a strategy to assist assessment is the decision by some managers to instigate a new reporting procedure. We suggested, however, that they should consider the traditional procedure. That procedure involves an early warning report to parents about students who experience difficulties in, for example, the autumn term, and a full report of students' achievements being given in the summer. A number of schools reconsidered the traditional system and decided that it was better and that they would use it.

We have suggested to schools that they should use the extensive guidance databases that we have produced. They are user-friendly, they work well in schools and they help students to understand the stages along the way. We have trained teachers in the use of those databases. That strategy, which is being followed by a number of schools, has gone down very well.

Instead of assessment being done early in a course, there should be recognition of the sea change that takes place when students move from standard grade to higher—a sea change in relation to what students might achieve. Some of the skills that are needed to write an essay come later than the skills that are involved in taking knowledge on board. We suggest that teachers should give a little extra time to take that sea change into account, rather than feeling that they must assess students in October, 40 hours into a course.

Schools should set up a large calendar in their staff room to allow staff to pinpoint when they will conduct assessments. Rules of engagement should be decided. Those are the detailed strategies that Tony Keeley talked about.

Cathy Jamieson: I am sorry to interrupt you, but I was trying to get at more practical strategies

rather than the philosophical background to assessment. Some teachers in schools told me that it is difficult to fit assessment into the timetable if one has to reassess students as well as work towards the next assessment. I represent a rural area, where the schools are not huge and do not contain a large numbers of pupils taking each subject. The practicalities of timetabling assessments became a problem. Can you offer those schools any advice or guidance?

Tony Keeley: A good example of a way in which having too many assessments in one week can be avoided is that of a school that divided the year into fortnights and gave each subject only one day within that fortnight on which exams could be held. That meant that there was no way in which a student would come in and have two exams on one day. Other people have found different ways of producing the same result—students not having more than one internal assessment on the same day.

Cathy Jamieson: Might students who did not have the advantage of that strategy be entitled to claim that they had been disadvantaged, if, for example, they found themselves having to undertake several internal assessments in a short space of time?

Tony Keeley: I am sure that you will find differences among schools in the operation of the timetable this year. In most cases, schools saw the problems coming; the problems did not come as a surprise to anyone, and we would expect schools to plan to avoid clashes. However, schools took different approaches in avoiding those clashes.

Some interesting research on avoiding stress in students has been conducted recently. The SQA undertook a large survey in June and the Scottish Parent Teacher Council conducted a survey of parents. Students seem to be concerned about too many assessments being conducted at the same time, which is why we think it important to find models of avoiding clashes.

However, the research also gave us positive feedback about the value of internal assessment. That feedback was not anecdotal—I am not talking about one or two students, as 1,000 students' responses were analysed. The most common comment made in the Scottish Parent Teacher Council's research was that internal assessment was generally seen as helpful: five such comments were made for every three comments that students found internal assessment stressful.

We are concerned about stress and want to keep it in mind, but I should add that we got positive feedback from students on how much they value the internal assessment, as it gives them something under their belts before they sit the final

exam. They know how they are progressing during the year before they reach the final exam. Those surveys have given us useful statistical, rather than anecdotal, information.

16:30

Cathy Jamieson: I want to test some of the feedback that I received from students. Some said that, in some subjects, the course work, the expectations and the internal assessments did not relate to the final exam and that they were not as well prepared as might have been expected. Will you address that issue for the coming year?

Tony Keeley: That is already being examined. We know which subjects have internal assessment set only at unit level. It is the nature of the assessment that, in some subjects, the students can perform beyond the level of the unit requirements for a particular task. In other subjects, they cannot do so because levels of knowledge and understanding are set at the level of the unit. In those cases, however, we had already produced additional material that people could incorporate into a prelim or a unit test, showing the demands placed by the course over and above the units. I made a list of that additional material nine months ago, as somebody asked about where it could be found.

We have raised the issue many times at seminars. I am not sure whether the message was always passed on, but we made it clear in which subjects additional materials were required and were made available. We told people about the variety of ways in which that material could be used to ensure that students did not think that the course—

Cathy Jamieson: Sorry to interrupt, but could I ask what the subjects were?

Tony Keeley: Mainly maths and sciences.

Ian Jenkins: Could you comment on the lines of communication? Many bodies seem to be involved, but there does not appear to be a straight line of communication. You mention dealing with schools, and you presumably deal with the inspectors and with the Executive. Do you accept that there is a proliferation of bodies and that it is not clear who is in charge at what time?

There was a point at which you must have handed things over to the SQA and it has not been clear to some of your stakeholders—as you call them—that, for example, something has been done or somebody has been responsible for doing things. If the number of assessments is to be changed or if internal assessment is to be re-examined, who will do that? Who makes the decision? In answering that, could you mention in particular your relationship with HMI?

Mary Pirie: I will start with the links with the SQA. If we received a letter from a local authority that raised an issue that belonged to the SQA, we would forward that letter to the SQA—

Ian Jenkins: Why would the local authority write to you about something that was the responsibility of the SQA?

Mary Pirie: Authorities might sometimes know us as their link office. They might not be so clear about who to write to in the SQA. We would send the letter to the SQA and send back a letter to the local authority, explaining what we had done and specifying to whom we had sent our letter in the SQA. The authority would then have a direct line of communication.

As Tony Keeley said, there was direct communication between the SQA and local authorities in many cases. Communication between us and other partners in the development programme is essential, because we all have jobs to do. Assessment decisions are made inside the SQA, which has an examinations committee and a raft of bodies that approve changes to its qualifications. They would make the decisions. It was important for us to send our information about concerns to the SQA in order to allow such decisions to be made.

Ian Jenkins: In that case—I am honestly not trying to be difficult—what are you doing?

Mary Pirie: What is our work now?

Ian Jenkins: Yes. Are you dealing with the content of the courses, for example?

Mary Pirie: We develop learning and teaching materials to help to deliver the courses.

Ian Jenkins: As distinct from the national assessment banks?

Mary Pirie: As against national assessment material. We run the staff development programmes. We do the field testing through the implementation studies, to check how things are going and to try to resolve any problems. Recently, we held information sessions with the business community about the qualifications. Our work as a development unit is established through a group called the development unit advisory group.

Ian Jenkins: That is where we start getting into difficulties.

Mary Pirie: That group has representatives in our parent organisation, Learning and Teaching Scotland, in the funding division of the Scottish Executive and in HMI. That is where the work plan for the year is set up.

Ian Jenkins: So the people in the parent organisation are your bosses.

Mary Pirie: The organisation sets our tasks. The general work targets for the whole programme—of which we form only a part—are agreed by the implementation group.

Ian Jenkins: So there is you, there is the other group and there is the implementation group.

Mary Pirie: The implementation group is the umbrella group, which makes all the policy decisions for the programme and allows for the representation of directors of education, parents, college principals and others—the appropriate stakeholders in the programme.

The implementation group has a general strategy for the whole programme. The bit that belongs to the unit—the bit that we do—becomes the interests of the unit advisory group, from which we get our work plan. Our targets are set in relation to the plan and are approved by that advisory group.

Ian Jenkins: There is also the higher still liaison group.

Mary Pirie: The liaison group is a working group, which was set up alongside the implementation group by the Scottish Executive.

Ian Jenkins: Does the inspectorate drive this?

Mary Pirie: The inspectorate works with the programme in several ways. The senior chief inspector of schools chairs the implementation group and the liaison group. That is a key role.

At the subject level, there are subject inspectors who, like the field officers from higher still, serve on the subject groups. Their job is to advise and to support the decisions that are made. They work alongside us to offer advice and information. The Executive and HMI are represented on the development unit advisory group.

Ian Jenkins: Thank you.

The Convener: Ian Jenkins is happy.

Ian Jenkins: I would not say happy.

The Convener: We all understand the issue a lot more clearly than we did. I thank Mary Pirie and Tony Keeley for attending this afternoon's meeting and for answering our questions.

Meeting closed at 16:36.

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