

ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE

Wednesday 12 September 2001
(Morning)

Session 1

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ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE

21st Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

*Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
*Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
*David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)
*Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED

Professor Jim Gallacher (Adviser)
Chris Graham (Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department)
Dr Ewart Keep (Adviser)
Roger Mullin (Adviser)
Professor Maria Slowey (Adviser)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Judith Evans

ASSISTANT CLERK

Linda Orton

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee

Wednesday 12 September 2001

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 10:03]

The Convener (Alex Neil): Welcome to the 21st meeting in 2001 of the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee. As of this week, the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee and all the other committees of the Parliament are being broadcast on the web. It is however a sad day on which to hold our first worldwide webcast.

We meet this morning with heavy hearts. Although there is general agreement that our meeting should go ahead, we will keep it crisp and to the point. In the full meeting of Parliament this afternoon we will offer our condolences to the American people, and our condemnation of what happened yesterday. However, it is appropriate that we take a few seconds for reflection before we start our formal business.

We have apologies from Tavish Scott, who is at the Justice 2 Committee and hopes to join us later. Kenny Macintosh is at the Standards Committee and might join us later, depending on the progress that is made by that committee.

I welcome Sandra George who is sketching our activities this morning. I am sure she will be glad to show anybody her drawings.

Items in Private

The Convener: Agenda item 1 is the proposal to discuss items 6 and 7 in private. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Subordinate Legislation

The Convener: Agenda item 2 concerns subordinate legislation. The Education (Student Loans) (Scotland) Regulations 2000 Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/228) and the Students' Allowance (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/229) stem from the Education and Training (Scotland) Act 2001, which was dealt with by the committee. They would extend the law to cover distance learning, which the committee has supported.

The Students' Allowance (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/229) would permit electronic applications for student allowances which, I assume, will be welcomed.

The Repayment of Student Loans (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/227) stem from the Education (Graduate Endowment and Student Support) (Scotland) Act 2001. I make no comment on that.

We have with us Chris Graham—who is head of the higher education student support policy branch of the Scottish Executive enterprise and lifelong learning department—and Jim Logie, who is becoming a regular at the committee and who is from the office of the solicitor to the Scottish Executive. The committee must report to Parliament. Is it agreed that we will make no recommendation on any of the regulations?

Members indicated agreement.

Chris Graham (Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department): I am flagging up to the committee that we must make a further amendment to the student loans regulations. The change relates to the introduction of foundation degrees in England and Wales and ensures that we can offer loans to students who are taking those degrees. We hope to lay the regulations tomorrow.

The Convener: Will they be negative instruments?

Chris Graham: Yes.

Lifelong Learning Inquiry

The Convener: Agenda item 3 concerns the reports on the lifelong learning inquiry case studies. We agreed to four or five case studies. We must still decide what the other two or three case studies will be.

The first case study was a visit to John Wheatley College to consider the issues of access in and around the east end of Glasgow. As part of another case study, we went to the University of the Highlands and Islands Millenium Institute and to Crichton campus in Dumfries. Written reports have been circulated to members, but one person from each of the case studies will supplement the written report with additional comments. I will then allow questions.

As I said, we should keep business brisk and crisp this morning.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I have some photographic evidence of our visit, which I will circulate afterwards. Kenny Macintosh and I were made most welcome by John Wheatley College, which gave us some material that I will give to Simon Watkins for later circulation.

We were most impressed by what we found at the college. The new building on the Easterhouse campus is a principal part of the college. It makes a considerable difference to the college, especially when compared with the building next door.

The people whom we met were keen to set out a number of the key issues that they faced and they did that well, although some of the issues are not within the competence of the Parliament.

The first issue—which could not be overstated by the people whom we met—was the impact of the benefits trap and the so-called cocktail of benefits that people receive, from housing benefit to various invalidity benefits and jobseekers allowance. That situation means that learning can be unattractive and that people must make a significant financial decision about whether to begin the learning process. Losing benefits is regarded as a serious disincentive to learning. The view of most of the people to whom we spoke—staff and students—is that unless issues in relation to benefits can be resolved, most other actions that are designed to tempt people into the learning environment will be unsuccessful. That is a major point.

The other issue that struck me particularly about that environment—an issue that we have not examined in Parliament—was that there is a serious gender issue in relation to men. If one excludes the students of the various building-related courses that are offered by the college,

some 80 per cent of the students are female. We had the opportunity to meet a number of women who had returned to education and I was impressed by their enthusiasm for education and lifelong learning, not only for themselves, but for their families. However, that is not the case among young men in the area.

Attracting young men into the learning environment is a serious problem. The college has undertaken some radical measures including, in effect, stopping people in the street and—almost in a crusading manner—trying to encourage them to go into the learning environment.

The problem ties in with a lack of understanding of what the employment world is about. Kenneth Macintosh and I were struck by survey results that indicate that when men were asked which jobs they wanted and were seeking, they talked about jobs in the shipyards, being a fitter or working in a steelworks, which are jobs that are simply not available. Those are the opinions of young people aged between 20 and 25 who still regard work in that way. There are many problems related to getting young men into the learning environment.

Another point that was made strongly by all the people to whom we spoke was in relation to their past relationship with the secondary education system, about which people were universally negative. We met people who were succeeding in the further education environment, but who had failed in the school environment. They anticipated that their children would also fail in school. That must be addressed. That situation creates duplication of resources, because people go through a course in school, fail it and then enter further education where they succeed at it. There are difficult issues about the relationship between school and further education in relation to, for example, the time when people transfer from school to a college environment. The problem of peer pressure is a large part of the reason why people fail in school.

10:15

The outreach work is particularly impressive. It shows how people get into the education system by giving them a taste of that environment before they take it further. On gender, many of the women who attended groups in one of the centres, such as the multiple birth group, went into the education environment. If men came to a centre for a reason—to use the computer, for example—they came for that purpose and then left without continuing with education. The difference is that the women use their experience to go into the education system.

There are many other issues in the other reports, including matters of funding and the relationship with universities. There is a perception

at the John Wheatley College that a premium has been put on students from certain postcode areas, which makes association with those students attractive to other education institutions. It is felt that that does not create a productive environment because there are short-term financial advantages for the other education institutions to take on such students, but without a long-term commitment to them or to their area. That is perceived as unhelpful.

The Convener: You said that there is a particular problem with young men. Is there also a problem with men over 40, who are the hard-core unemployed and the most difficult people to retrain and re-employ?

David Mundell: There is a general problem with men, but I cited the example of a survey of young men and their employment aspirations, which were completely unrealistic. The respondents still believe that manual labour is required and that skills are not.

The Convener: That they still have such a misconception suggests that there is also an issue about the careers advice and information that they are given.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): This is an excellent report, for which I thank David Mundell and Kenneth Macintosh.

The convener and I spoke at an Association of Scottish Colleges conference on Friday morning. We talked about capacity versus locality of provision, which we must consider in our review because it is so important. In the evidence that we took in the previous inquiry and in our own experience, the issue of flexibility and the movement from school to further education to higher education comes up time and again. We must make that transition seamless and we must ensure that funding systems do not act as barriers. Extra funding for those who find it difficult to return to education is right and proper, but you cite examples that we know are happening. The matter is about how the committee can get information and evidence on how to stop funding systems acting as a barrier. I do not know if that came over to the reporters, but it is a big issue.

David Mundell: It is also important to note that further education might be a much more appropriate learning environment for some people than secondary education. A school has not necessarily failed because a person leaves it.

There will certainly not be seamlessness between the institutions unless they work hard. It is clear that John Wheatley College, for example, has worked hard with the university sector in Glasgow to develop a relationship and to build foundation and gateway courses. However, such relationships do not happen automatically. To

most people, it is self-evident that there are frictions between colleges in Glasgow, colleges elsewhere and the secondary education sector. In some places, the secondary education sector is not as closely involved as it is elsewhere. That is a big challenge. There are disadvantages to co-operating in respect of much of the funding.

The Convener: John Wheatley College and the new West Lothian College are worth visiting. Both are state-of-the-art colleges that have received funding to become state-of-the-art colleges. On Friday, we heard that other colleges could be state-of-the-art colleges if they received the same funding. Members should pay a visit to both colleges if they get the opportunity.

Annabel Goldie will speak about Crichton campus.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): I thought that I was meant to speak about the UHI Millennium Institute.

The Convener: Bill Butler will talk about that visit.

Miss Goldie: Would Bill Butler talk about the UHI Millennium Institute report first? I could then deal with my report on Crichton campus.

The Convener: Annabel Goldie wanted you to mention the Royal Highland Hotel too, Bill.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): The convener, Annabel and I were made very welcome in Inverness. We met the chief executive and the deputy chief executive of the UHI Millennium Institute. There was a formal presentation and we took part in a videolink with the associated colleges, which was fairly fruitful in helping us to gather evidence. We then visited Inverness College and met staff and students.

I want to talk about some of the main issues that arose. Marilyn Livingstone mentioned flexibility—that issue also arose during the Inverness visit and concerned the UHI Millennium Institute. If non-traditional learners are to be attracted to lifelong learning, it will require much more flexibility than conventional learning. People should be able to drop in and out of courses as and when required.

There is a necessity for accreditation of prior learning and for the harmonisation of such accreditation across the board in Scotland so that credit transfer from one course to another, or from one institution to another, can be more readily accepted.

The funding of part-time places is a social inclusion issue. Lifelong learning is predominantly a part-time activity, but the Scottish Further Education Funding Council does not seem to understand part-time students and does not finance them properly.

There is difficulty in attracting participants from small and medium-sized enterprises simply because the majority of SMEs in the Highlands and Islands have fewer than 10 staff. SMEs cannot afford the overhead if one staff member is taken away from their work—that issue must be addressed.

There are continuing problems with student finance. Many think that the mature students bursary is a disappointment. Reasons for dropping out should be monitored to measure the extent to which finance is the cause. We were told about the complexities of whole funding. We need a one-stop shop in each college to help students when difficulties arise or, rather, before difficulties arise. Students should be given the good advice that they need.

It was also made clear—we found this elsewhere—that the further education/higher education divide is outdated, artificial and largely irrelevant to modern society. I believe that the National Union of Students in Scotland has said in the newspapers today that we need to view such education as tertiary education. We need to consider the divide and whether it can be updated to meet the needs and demands of present-day Scotland.

At Inverness College, we were made aware of the difficulties in implementing the McCrone recommendations—today's newspapers deal with that issue, too. There are serious internal pay matters. If, for instance, further education lecturers' hours are cut by 50 per cent, that would place a burden on Inverness College—the main college in UHIMI—that could not be met.

The conclusion is that there were unrealistic expectations at the outset as to how long it would take to establish UHIMI as a university. We heard diverse opinions about when it would become a fully-fledged university—it could take between five and 20 years. It became apparent that some time will be needed to get it to the required standard for research development and postgraduate degrees.

The visit was interesting and raised many issues that the inquiry must consider.

The Convener: Yesterday, I received some of the promised follow-up information. It will be circulated to the committee in a co-ordinated fashion so that is easy to read, collate and understand.

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): The report says:

"Online learning is not a cheaper option than traditional learning."

I believe that, because it fits in with what the Robert Gordon University—which has developed a virtual campus—says. I am interested in UHIMI

being dubious about its ability to compete effectively against United States universities, for example. I wonder about other universities. The issue is important and we might want to consider it.

Would Bill Butler expand on his conclusion, which states:

"The difficulty of entering the research gateway is now being recognised, in particular the impact that research funding based on RAE results has on emerging disciplines and departments?"

Bill Butler: The set-up costs and the support that is necessary for non-traditional learners mean that online learning is not a cheaper option.

On the conclusion, only a few departments of UHIMI could—in association with the University of Aberdeen—reach the required standard for research and development. That makes it difficult to get the necessary depth that would be needed to develop RAE funding.

The Convener: There is also an historical issue, in that, until we passed the statutory instrument in April, the institutions did not have the status of higher education institutions; they were further education colleges. That means that there was no research base and no stream of research funding. That is beginning to change. Five or six research fellows have been appointed and are working on various projects, some funded by the private sector, some by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and some by organisations such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise. However, it will take years to build up the research base to the point that one would normally associate with a university.

Elaine Thomson: That is pertinent to the inquiry that we are just completing. We should not have a system that puts up barriers to new institutions moving as fast as they can to develop research.

10:30

The Convener: There are a number of issues and I am sure that they will be brought out in the follow-up paperwork.

Annabel Goldie will now tell us about the visit to Dumfries and Galloway.

Miss Goldie: Alex Neil, Bill Butler and I went to Dumfries and Galloway College and the Crichton campus, where we were warmly received. A great deal of thought had been given to our visits to ensure that maximum use was made of time so that the relevant and worthwhile material could be presented to us.

To say that the Crichton campus is idyllic would not be an understatement. We saw it on a beautiful afternoon. It is a lovely location and the

reaction of the staff and the students was positive—clearly, the nature of the surroundings has a significant effect on their sense of cohesion and on their interest in what they are doing. As well as the staff and the students, we met the academic council, which is responsible for running the campus. The three groups gave us access to useful and relevant information.

As happened in the other visits, themes emerged before we got down to the nitty-gritty of particular problems. The most significant theme was the blurring of the historic distinction between higher and further education, to which Bill Butler referred. Both the visit to Crichton campus and our earlier visit to UHI made it clear that that distinction indeed belongs to history. Now, people seem to be thinking in terms of delivering and providing tertiary education. Within tertiary education, there are various degrees of academic provision or training. That led to the conclusion that there is a need to redesign funding, which has already been alluded to. The funding mechanisms cannot cope with the demands of tertiary education at the moment. There are strictures that result in misfits as institutions and organisations try to deliver something that the funding machinery cannot cope with.

The second theme mirrored what we had heard at UHI and concerned credit transfer and the accreditation of prior learning. That system has to be developed and properly implemented. There should be much better advice to assist people in transferring across sectors and institutions in Scotland. The “zig-zag path of learning” that our report talks about should be supported and there must be seamless articulation between further education and higher education institutions. We were told that the provision of lifelong learning by various bodies has resulted in something of a maze and that the sources of provision should be clarified.

The issue of student finance was raised cogently by the students and was echoed by the managerial and academic staff. In that context, we were again told that the traditional funding mechanisms for students are no longer suitable. As mature and part-time students appear to be the future for tertiary education, that area should be considered closely.

The students complained—with considerable justification—of the complexity of the rules surrounding financial entitlement and access to funding streams. It was suggested that a comprehensive database of the funding streams could be developed. The database should also allow people to find out what happens to benefits over time, as students had found that, as they proceeded through their courses, they were sometimes debarred from continuing entitlement.

That proposal seemed to us to be sensible.

Ancillary, but no less important, issues included that of individual learning accounts. They are seen as beneficial, but also as bureaucratic for the institutions to administer. That complaint echoed what we had heard from UHI. It was thought that it might be possible to transform the ILAs into lifelong learning accounts, which would record achievement as well as expenditure. That is an interesting prospect that fits in well with the system of credit transfer and the accreditation of prior learning.

The college made a budgetary plea. At the moment, it works on an annual budgetary basis, which does not sit well with what is being done in the rest of the campus by participating organisations, some of which are working on three-year funding models. The college said that institutions should be given a three-year funding model in line with Government finance to ensure more symmetry in funding. It is difficult for the college to make partnership and strategic decisions if it can look ahead only one year at a time while its partners can look further ahead. That introduces an impediment to sensible strategic planning.

The college said that the Government and agencies should recognise that further education colleges are a strategic partner in the development of lifelong learning and are not just a provider. As such, colleges should be involved in the embryonic thinking about the strategies, initiatives and concepts that the colleges will have to deliver.

It was explained to us that colleges and, to some extent, universities receive significant resources for targeted initiatives that must be accounted for separately. Again, that introduces obstructions, blockages and bureaucracy, which makes the delivery process more challenging than it has to be. It was suggested that the targets could be maintained but that the accounting mechanisms could be rationalised. We all had a lot of sympathy with that view.

The Crichton campus demonstrated the importance of outreach centres as a way of attracting people into lifelong learning, as there are people in the area who would not participate in the process unless they could see a doorway through which they could go. The use of information technology is critical in ensuring the successful operation of outreach centres. Like the Highlands, Dumfries and Galloway is a vast and disparate area—Stranraer is approximately 75 miles to the west of Dumfries, where we were.

In short, those of us who went found the experience stimulating as well as hugely enjoyable and interesting. What we saw was an encouraging example of how, where a demand has arisen—

where there is a niche need—providers can step in with innovation and imagination and achieve a model. As far as I understand it, that model is unprecedented in Scotland. Indeed, there is probably no precedent for such a structure in the United Kingdom and perhaps in Europe. However, imaginative minds were able to examine the situation, to step in, to provide a model and to get on with worthwhile provision of lifelong learning in that area.

The Convener: Another issue has been raised. I was at the Institute for System Level Integration the other day, which delivers degrees for four universities. They have an arrangement whereby the institute awards a joint degree on behalf of all four. A similar situation arises at Crichton, where there are two universities, plus Bell College, which is an HEI. Issues around that unique situation will need to be resolved. We requested a lot of follow-up information, which will be circulated to the committee as appropriate.

Are there any questions for Miss Goldie?

David Mundell: I want to raise a point that you did not mention but that is in your report—underemployment. Like other local MSPs, I am a great supporter of what has happened at Crichton. However, people who have come into the lifelong learning process and have been tremendously enhanced by it are now, ironically, being faced with the fact that they may have to move. As they are in a less favoured area—as you describe it in your paper—once they have completed their course, they find that the employment opportunities are elsewhere. The great irony is that access to education is not followed by access to employment.

Miss Goldie: Yes, that did emerge as an issue, particularly from the students. They were mindful of perhaps being overqualified for employment opportunities in the area. However, one student took an innovatory approach—he felt confident that, with his degree, he would be able to start a business in the area. You are right to raise the issue, Mr Mundell, but we recognise it as a more broad, economic concern. Although it is significant, we took the view that it should not prejudice a successful lifelong learning operation in the area.

The Convener: That is a general problem across Scotland and in other countries, but it is accentuated in that area. The irony is that Crichton was set up primarily to halt the drift of young people out of Dumfries and Galloway. If there is no job at the end of their education, a lot of them might drift elsewhere.

An interesting statistic, which is relevant but not central to our work, is that the Prince's Scottish Youth Business Trust last year received 117

applications from 18 to 25-year-olds from the area who wanted to set up in business. However, only seven of them did set up in business. That conversion rate must be the lowest in Scotland, judging from my PSYBT days.

Miss Goldie: That is disappointing. The challenge for the area in general is what it can do to improve the opportunities for graduates. Interestingly, the impression emerged that a lot of the students would never have entered lifelong learning if that provision had not been there. In other words, they would not have left the area to seek lifelong learning in Glasgow or Paisley or Edinburgh. We must recognise the first stop—that it is excellent to have that provider in the area. At least that provides access to lifelong learning for people who otherwise would not encounter it.

The Convener: That was useful feedback. There will be additional information and we will decide on the other two or three case studies and who will do them under agenda item 5.

10:45

The Convener: We now move to item 4. I invite our four special advisers on lifelong learning to take their seats. I think that this is the first time that we have met some of the advisers; certainly it is the first time that we have met all four together.

I welcome to the committee Professor Jim Gallacher, Dr Ewart Keep, Professor Maria Slowey and Roger Mullin, who I think is a visiting professor somewhere. I thank you all for agreeing to participate in and to assist and advise us on the inquiry. Each of you has circulated a paper, which all committee members will have read. It would be useful for each of you to talk briefly to your paper—for a maximum of four minutes—highlighting the key issues. If it is agreeable, we will have a general question-and-answer session at the end, rather than having a separate session with each adviser.

Ladies first.

Professor Maria Slowey (Adviser): It is an honour and a privilege to be invited to contribute to the discussions.

I should apologise—I have a slight croak. I have just returned from my own country of the Celtic tiger. Although the weather was wonderful, I managed to catch a cold.

I want to draw three broad themes, which I addressed in my paper, to the attention of the committee. The first is about the concept of lifelong learning that we want to develop for the future in Scotland. The paper makes the case that this is not a semantic discussion. The interpretation of lifelong learning contains contradictions and tensions. If we take too narrow

an interpretation of lifelong learning, we are in danger of focusing purely on a skills agenda. If we take too broad an interpretation, will our funding systems, our management systems and our providers be able to cope with that all-encompassing strategy?

From the earlier discussion of the case study visits, which I found most interesting, it is evident that the committee is not in danger of taking a narrow view. However, it may be that later, when it comes to prioritisation, some of those tensions in our understanding of lifelong learning will need to be addressed more fully.

The second issue is putting the learner at the centre. The perception is that our traditional systems have been largely provider-led—that is based on a comparative, 10-country study that I recently completed with a range of colleagues. A lot of the rhetoric of lifelong learning is now about putting the learner at the centre of the agenda. There are many reasons for that, which are partly to do with a general focus on consumer-led approaches and with the fragmentation and dislocation of contemporary life.

Several issues arise from the emphasis on putting the learner at the centre. Learners are not an undifferentiated mass; they are diverse. We know from research where many of the difficulties and barriers are. How do we address that diversity and avoid increasing the economic and social gaps in society in the policies that we develop?

Another issue to do with the individual focus in lifelong learning is that of rights and responsibilities. Colleagues and committee members may wish to address that in discussion. The question is where we want the balance to lie in Scotland. Earlier, reference was made to the importance of good-quality guidance and information. We know that the education and training market in the post-compulsory sphere is increasingly complex, competitive and hierarchical. There is not parity of esteem across different types of lifelong learning opportunity. What are the implications for how we help people to find their way through these mazes?

My final point on the focus on individual learners relates to the complexity of the decision-making process. I found the feedback from members' visits most interesting. The members highlighted and showed an understanding of that complexity, which different types of individual face in taking steps in and out of learning. One of the challenges is to develop systems that recognise that at different times in our lives, depending on our occupational, economic and social situations, we will be more or less responsive to different types of learning opportunities. The process is long term, however.

My next point is about diversity of provision and creating a sufficiently wide range of learning opportunities that will be available to the population as a whole when it needs them. In my paper, I say that despite the belief that I imagine we all share—that investment in education and training delivers social and economic benefits—in my experience the causal relationship is not easy to demonstrate. There are other experts present, who may be able to do so clearly.

What we can say, particularly given the work carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, is that it is in those countries that are investing in education and training across a spectrum—which ranges from non-formal, non-credit-bearing, community-based learning opportunities provided through voluntary organisations to quite sophisticated systems of employer investment in high-level skills—where economic benefits and enhanced social cohesion can be found.

My final point relates to how we in Scotland assess our progress towards the objectives that the committee will set and that we hope the Parliament will endorse. Robust research is required, leading, we hope, to evidence-informed policy development. That will help us to identify how much progress we are making, although I would add that, in my opinion, that requires fairly lengthy time scales.

Roger Mullin (Adviser): I wish to make some comments that go slightly beyond my paper, given the interesting points raised through the case studies. I will try to address four or five key issues, which I hope I have raised in my paper and which arise from today's discussions.

Marilyn Livingstone raised the issue of flexibility in relation to one of the case studies. Much provision, particularly in the vocational training sphere, does not offer what Maria Slowey termed "parity of esteem" among the different qualifications. Arguably, one of the strengths of the Scottish education and training system is that we have a variety of routes through learning. We have vocational qualifications, further education qualifications of various sorts and higher education qualifications. However, many of our publicly funded programmes do not confer parity of esteem on those qualifications. I know that Marilyn Livingstone has a particular interest in programmes such as skillseekers and is concerned by their lack of flexibility. It would be worth while for the committee to investigate that issue.

The issue has been raised of what I would call first-steps provision for those who are most excluded. It is often a significant challenge to get such people to take the first step into lifelong learning. In a paper published in March last year,

the Department for Education and Employment argued that, according to its research, many of the most excluded in society found it a big step to embark on the kind of training that required them to target a qualification. It suggested that they should be provided with steps towards such training. For example, I have been working with a project in Strabane in Northern Ireland, where a big effort is being made to enable the people in the community to engage in learning without threatening them with immediate assessment of whether they will pass the course or are making sufficient progress. That is a big issue.

Maria Slowey raised an issue whose importance is difficult to exaggerate: how we put the learner, rather than supply-side organisations, centre stage. With my particular interest in vocational training, I would also ask how we place employers appropriately in the mix. I am concerned about Government programmes and agencies that make the assumption that contracting with managing agents—what I term intermediaries—is the only way of doing that. Jim Gallacher's recent evaluation of FAST-TRAC in Fife contains some interesting comments on an attempt that was made to pilot working directly with young people and employers. The paper found that the overall policy context was unsupportive of such initiatives.

In my paper, I point out that Scottish Enterprise's plans for the future, as manifested in its current business transformation programme and in its corporate training systems, make the assumption that intermediary contracting will be used. There is no provision for dealing directly with employers or young people. Despite this committee's report last year on the delivery of local economic development services, Scottish Enterprise continues to assume that funding will be limited to vocational qualifications. Some fundamental questions need to be asked about that.

One of the issues that Maria Slowey raised is addressed in a slightly narrower way in my paper: the need for a good evidence base on which to construct policies. I hope that Jim Gallacher did not mind my reflecting on his work evaluating FAST-TRAC and my commenting on what I perceived as the difficulties that were being caused by a lack of good-quality data. I will give the committee a simple example of that. Since their formation, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise have probably spent in the region of £1 billion on vocational training. The Scottish Executive has initiated a reform programme aimed at creating a new organisation called careers Scotland, and the need for quality guidance has been recognised.

However, how do we respond to the young person who comes to us and says, "I have just left school. I have the following six standard grades.

This is my background and these are my interests. If I choose the course of action that you are suggesting, what are my chances of attaining a particular qualification? Once I have done that, what are my chances of getting a job?" We do not have the information that would enable us to answer those basic questions. How can we provide effective guidance if we are not gathering the kind of information that we need? We need to scrutinise the extent to which the public agencies are gathering, analysing and publishing the type of evidence that would usefully inform policy development.

Annabel Goldie talked about individual learning accounts. In my paper, I point to different inquiries, such as that carried out by the Cubie committee—of which Maria Slowey was a member—that asked whether individual learning accounts would be a vehicle for creating funding that would follow the individual rather than the institution. If we have a funding vehicle that follows the individual, there may be some prospect of simplifying the regime for that individual—making it more understandable and forcing different components of a system that at the moment seems rather fragmented to come together.

That must be about four minutes.

The Convener: It is three and a half.

11:00

Dr Ewart Keep (Adviser): It is a great pleasure to be here. I wish to amplify one or two points that I made in my paper and add a couple that have occurred to me while listening to the evidence. The first is about the most excluded groups, which are the hardest to reach. They are the key to any inclusion policies. They are also quite expensive and complex to deal with.

Some of the issues that came out of the visit to John Wheatley College replicate what other research has told us, which is that approaches for the inclusion of the most excluded groups require sophisticated targeting. There are also major issues for the bureaucratic management of learning systems, in the sense that people who manage systems like to see outputs. That usually means qualifications—something measurable. One of the really big issues is that for people who are taking their first steps, the outcomes may be difficult to measure, but those first steps are crucial.

An interesting point that came out of David Mundell's presentation concerns building the foundations of lifelong learning during compulsory education. If the foundations for lifelong learning are not laid down while people are in school, an awful lot of what happens subsequently is likely to be remedial and very expensive. We have a

problem in that compulsory education switches off many people from any future prospect of learning.

In my paper, I flag up the fact that there is a need to think hard at a policy level about developing lifelong learning policies that recognise and can accommodate the different interests of some of the groups that must be catered for. Social and economic agendas raise different priorities. Sometimes they overlap; sometimes they do not. For example, at times, individuals and employers have different interests. Many employers wish to provide their work force with training, but often that training is specific to a particular job task and is not the wider training that individuals might seek to enhance their employability. There are issues about different actors in the system wanting different outcomes and being willing to pay for different outcomes. That is one of the most difficult issues that lifelong learning policy has to grapple with.

That brings me to the role of the workplace, what it can most appropriately deliver and how it can be helped to deliver more. I am concerned that in the UK during the past 20 years we have spent large sums of public money on throughput—giving people money to put things through a system. We have spent relatively little, particularly in training terms, on funding for capacity building, for example, the training of trainers. If you lift the carpet and start to look at the capacity of many employers, workplaces and much of our training infrastructure to provide rich learning environments, you will find that scary things have been swept under it. We have to think about how we can build system capacity.

The final point that I wish to flag up—it has been mentioned already, but it is important—is how we measure progress over time. Plainly, people want to know whether they are progressing. The tendency has been to say, “The best way in which to do that is to set some targets.” However, the problem with targets—which we rediscover endlessly south of the border—is that there can be too many of them. The Department for Education and Skills has around 300 separate targets, according to which it tries to manage our education and training system. Often those targets conflict and are not helpful. Another problem with a lot of target setting is that the whole system becomes geared towards meeting the targets and misses everything else. It is necessary to measure, but it is necessary also to think about quite sophisticated, balanced scorecard forms of measurement if those measurement indicators are not to skew the way in which the system operates.

Professor Jim Gallacher (Adviser): I am also pleased to have been asked to work with the committee on this important topic and I look forward to contributing to its work. Members have

copies of my paper on the subject, which I have tried to structure broadly around the remit of the inquiry.

The first major point in my paper is that the concept of lifelong learning is difficult in many respects. As Maria Slowey said, to highlight that fact is not just to raise issues of semantics but to emphasise the fact that if we are to have clearer policy and strategy in the area, we must be clear about what we understand by the term “lifelong learning” and how we are using it. We seem to use the term to refer to many different areas of education and training provision that existed in the past, but which we are now calling lifelong learning. A lifelong learning strategy should identify the way in which all the elements are linked to each other and what it is that we are trying to achieve through linking the different forms of provision. Scotland is not unique in not having that kind of strategy, but if the committee produces a strategy with clear objectives and ideas about the ways in which the various elements can link together, that will be a major achievement.

To produce such a strategy, we must first determine the major elements that we might want to pursue. I have identified three elements in the first point in my paper. First, there is the idea of economic development and growth, which is important and will take up a lot of time. However, we must be careful about assuming that there is a link between investment in education and training and economic growth. I cite anecdotally the example of the Crichton campus, where new educational opportunities are being created that are not necessarily creating new employment opportunities. The evidence also shows clearly that the people who are most likely to access education and training are those who are already highly educated and are in qualified positions and relatively stable jobs.

Major questions on public policy remain to be addressed. If much of our effort is channelled through employers, the key groups that we have agreed are important will not be addressed adequately. There are also questions about the way in which the partners in the process should work together. One of the case studies—I think that it was that of the Crichton campus, although it might have been that of the UHI Millennium Institute—talked about strategic partnerships. There are interesting questions that we should ask concerning the role of the further education sector in lifelong learning and the way in which it interrelates with, for example, Scottish Enterprise and the local enterprise companies.

Roger Mullin commented on our analysis of FAST-TRAC in Fife. That analysis raised interesting questions about the forms of interrelationship that people are trying to establish.

As Roger said, what people were trying to do in Fife was constrained by the fact that we do not have a national framework to allow key strategic partnerships to develop. There are important questions about strategy and bringing together the different elements.

The second element of my first point relates to social inclusion. We have all referred to that and it is well recognised that there are major questions to be addressed. There is a real danger that an emphasis on lifelong learning can exacerbate social exclusion problems. If we place greater emphasis in our society on learning and gaining qualifications, there is a danger that those who do not already have qualifications will be least likely to gain them and that they will become more excluded. We must bear that in mind when we are considering lifelong learning. We need measures that draw people in. There were interesting references in the case studies to some of the work that the colleges have done to address that danger. The research that we have undertaken has emphasised the importance of community-based provision. Several people have mentioned that interesting and important area.

The final element of my first point is the concept of citizenship, which has not been mentioned. We must recognise that lifelong learning should be about citizenship, particularly in the context of the new Scottish Parliament and the growing emphasis on developing a new form of democratic participation in Scotland. There are major issues about how we develop strong forms of democratic participation at a local level. That also raises the age issue. The committee inquiry's terms of reference refer to people "of working age". A growing proportion of our society is no longer in that category, but could make major contributions to the democratic framework of our society. It is important that we take that on board.

I recognise that there is a danger of trying to do too much, but if we do not attempt to pull together the various themes and develop an interrelated strategy, there will be a perception that we have not come to terms with the issues. We have a valuable opportunity to do that, which would be a real achievement for Scotland and would provide a model for developments in the wider context.

The Convener: Thank you. As this is the first session of our lifelong learning inquiry, some members wish to declare an interest before we begin our discussion.

Miss Goldie: I declare an interest in that I am a member of the court of the University of Strathclyde.

Marilyn Livingstone: I worked at Fife College of Further and Higher Education for 16 years and in that job I was seconded to the FAST-TRAC

project for six months.

Des McNulty (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab): I was a long-term colleague of Jim Gallacher at Glasgow Caledonian University. I ended up as director of strategic planning. I was also a member of the court of the University of Glasgow between 1994 and 1999. Finally, although it is not directly related, I continue to be the deputy chair of the Wise Group, which is Scotland's largest organisation specialising in bringing people from long-term unemployment into work. I hope to raise that theme in our discussions.

The Convener: Thank you. I will open the meeting up to members to put questions to our advisers.

11:15

Marilyn Livingstone: Thank you for your presentations. Perhaps the main issue for the committee is how we link all the information and ensure that we are not missing anything. Maria Slowey talked about how wide we should make the inquiry. It should be all-encompassing and we must ensure that we take on board all the issues.

We do not have time this morning to raise all the issues, but I want to flag up one or two. One of the things that has become apparent to the committee is the need to consider the integration of learning, vocational training and primary sector education. We have been asked to examine the complexities of the guidance system, adult basic education and support that is taken on by local councils, the volume training sector, further and higher education and consider how we can make that somehow seamless. We must consider how we can put the learner at the centre of all that and how they can wade their way through all the difficulties.

Jim Gallacher talked about whether current funding structures are appropriate to supporting a coherent national strategy. I would like the committee to consider that. I would like the advisers to examine the current funding system, particularly as it relates to the individual. How can we ensure that the funding of individuals presents no barriers to choices so that people are not running around chasing funding streams?

Jim Gallacher talked about the FAST-TRAC model, with which I was involved way back at the beginning. If there had not been central policy constraints, I am sure that we would have achieved a flexible, integrated model. However, sometimes bureaucracy and policy impede progress. I would like us to examine how funding allows people to move through education.

We must also consider parity of funding and how

we can equalise funding. One of the slides that I used when Alex Neil and I talked to the ASC on Friday was from Linda McTavish, the principal of Anniesland College. She talked about those who got on, those who got by and those who got nowhere. She questioned where the largest amount of money was being spent. We thought that that question was central to what we were trying to do. The committee and the advisers need to consider whether funding is appropriately targeted. That is an important point that I would like the committee to explore.

Professor Gallacher: I agree. That is a fundamental issue. As Marilyn Livingstone suggested, we addressed it in our evaluation of FAST-TRAC. That research is interesting because it started off as a relatively limited examination of what was going on in Fife, but it has raised wider issues. The report from that research is almost complete and the Scottish Executive has a near final version. The Executive is aware that the committee has an interest in that and I think that it will try to ensure that the report is approved as soon as possible and made available.

Our work in Fife has illustrated the interesting opportunities that arise when we try to integrate funding from different sources. That presents major questions unless there is a national framework that supports that approach. Some big questions for the committee and the Executive are the extent to which our current funding structures support the development of a real strategy, whether we need change and, if so, what form it should take.

The Convener: I am sure that all the advisers have comments on all the points and questions. Rather than get every adviser to say something, it is probably better for members who wish to comment or ask questions to do so and then for each adviser to cover the points that they want to cover. That will be the quickest way to do it; otherwise we could be here till 5 o'clock this evening.

Miss Goldie: I was struck by everything that Roger Mullin said, but I was particularly struck by two things. One was that the learner should be put centre stage and that the employer should be placed there too. He said that current Scottish Enterprise plans assume an intermediary provision, not contracting directly with employers. Will he say whether there are any other prevailing assumptions that the committee ought to challenge?

The second point was that a good base of evidence is necessary if we are to construct policy sensibly. The inadequacy of good data to guide policy is a problem. Is there any source of evidence that the committee should contemplate investigating that at the moment we might not

have taken into account or might not intend to explore?

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): How do we keep focused so that we do not just cover everything and achieve nothing? Should we not be trying to work out where we are, where we want to go and how we are going to get there?

I am struck by the idea of putting the learner centre stage. What do we mean by that? Is there not an element of utilitarianism in that? Should we not also consider the interests of the state? If everybody wishes to study media studies or to become a hair stylist, should we allow that to happen or should we try to direct people? I know that we cannot put a square peg into a round hole, but how do we strike a balance between what the learner may want and the need of the state and economy to try to guide people.

Many people touched on social inclusion. There is an argument that much of that would be best achieved by putting resources into education early on and addressing in due course the generation or two that would be missed. Should we not perhaps adopt the approach that was taken in Ireland and front-load—even if that means taking resources that could go into lifelong learning—to address the generation that is coming through education and then come back to those who have been missed? What is the balance?

Des McNulty: We need to explore how realistic it is to turn round a selective-access, qualification-driven higher education system, which is dominated by what providers want to provide, into something that is more focused on customers, students and individual learners. We probably need to explore the hierarchy in that.

I am conscious that for a long time much continuing education was like a tugboat sailing along behind the ocean liner of higher education. What are the barriers to mainstreaming a lifelong learning perspective in higher education and possibly also in further education, where some of the same problems exist? What are your views on how far we have come with work-based and ICT-based learning? Is it the palliative that it is claimed to be by those who argue strenuously on its behalf or do we need to consider it as one strand of what needs to happen?

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): My one big worry about the exercise—it is not a new concern—is that we will not be finished by 5 o'clock tonight or even by 5 o'clock on 12 September, 2003. I agree with Kenny MacAskill that we need to be precise about what we are trying to achieve. If we nailed that down, we would do ourselves a considerable service.

I apologise for being late. I was at yet another committee meeting that clashed.

I was interested in Dr Keep's point about compulsory education putting people off pursuing other forms of education. I will be a bit repetitive here, but I want to mirror what Kenny MacAskill, Marilyn Livingstone and Annabel Goldie said about putting the learner centre stage and the point about funding following the individual rather than the institution. It is a fascinating area, at which we should take a good look.

Bill Butler: Roger Mullin's paper makes the point that the HE and FE sectors currently have little provision that is aimed at updating professional skills. What should we do to ensure that the issue of updating professional skills is met? Secondly, how can schools—in relation to 16 to 18-year-olds—and community education become more involved, especially with regard to encouraging the disadvantaged to take those first steps?

Thirdly, with reference to a point that was made by Dr Keep, how do we strike a balance between targets and learning, so that learning lasts through life and does not atrophy?

The Convener: I want to raise two or three issues that I think we should highlight. The first of those is the need for benchmarking with our international competitors. Clearly, our education system is way behind at the start of this century in comparison to where it was at the start of the previous century. We need some facts and figures to demonstrate that and we need to set some goals about where we want to be in the next five to 10 years to get us back up the international league table.

Secondly, we should be aware of the need to consider the 16 to 19-year-old age group as a continuous seam. Although our remit covers what happens after school, the relationship between 16 to 19-year-olds and schools is extremely important. We should not forget that. One of the issues will be the Executive's response to choices and opportunities for 16 to 19-year-olds.

Thirdly, a clear theme that is emerging from our two case studies and three visits is the blurring between further and higher education. The fact that about 50 per cent of all HE students come from FE in itself indicates that there is a much closer relationship these days between FE and HE than there was in the past.

I will ask each of you to make quick points. I do not expect—

Elaine Thomson: Will you let David Mundell and I comment?

David Mundell: We had the impression that you were going round the table, which is why we did not indicate that we wanted to speak.

The Convener: Very quickly, then, please.

Elaine Thomson: Some of the main themes have already been discussed. The witnesses' papers were extremely interesting. It is difficult to know where to start. I am interested in how we develop a seamless learning experience for people, which leads out of schools, through full-time education and so on and into when people start working. It has been pointed out to me that one of the weaknesses in the Scottish and UK economy is what happens when people come out of education and enter the workplace, especially during the first 10 to 15 years of work. Some of the main themes are already coming out.

The idea of person-centred learning—that the person is the main driver for learning and that the funding is attached to them—is very useful. What I also found interesting in Jim Gallacher's paper was the issue of regional labour markets and how we develop policies with those markets in mind.

Social inclusion is important. I am sure that it was flagged up to us during an earlier inquiry that most of the people who will be in the job market over the next 20 or 30 years are already in the job market—or, rather, they are not, but could be. It is important that we engage people in that. I flag up the work that is going on in Aberdeen, especially at the Middlefield Learning House, which is about how we take people who have had poor educational experiences and pull them into a learning environment.

David Mundell: We have already touched on the point relating to schools. We cannot not address that issue in relation to the balance of resources that are being deployed. Kenny MacAskill touched on that. In my view, further education is not there to remedy failing schools.

The other issue, which was touched on in the presentations, is the link between lifelong learning and economic development. There seems to be a prevailing view that those are automatically linked and that going down the line of investing in lifelong learning will automatically lead to a form of economic development. A number of issues associated with that must be addressed.

11:30

Finally, it is clear that within further and higher education there are all sorts of institutional barriers to doing anything about anything. I asked a parliamentary question on the view—which I share—that everybody who enters further or higher education on the basis of public funding should be required to take some form of information and communications technology course. I was surprised that the then deputy minister said that we cannot tell the universities what to do with the money that we give them.

The conclusion of our report must demonstrate

what some of the barriers to achieving are. It would be a fairly worthless exercise if we did not address the sort of barriers—which have a lot to do with structures and processes—that clearly exist in the system.

The Convener: Ken, you are not to be left out; it is your turn.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I apologise for being late. I was at another committee meeting this morning. My colleagues have raised a number of points. The overall strategic view is that we are keen for the committee to address the idea that lifelong learning is the key to economic growth. Jim Gallacher and Maria Slowey touched on the idea of human capital, in which investment in education and training produces outcomes for economic growth, but there is little evidence to back that up.

I noted a couple of other points about getting the balance right between the economic impact of lifelong learning and its impact on social inclusion and developing citizenship. It is interesting to note that historically, higher or further education tends not to narrow barriers, but can exacerbate them. The middle classes are most likely to take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities.

The Convener: Thank you. A number of those points are for the inquiry, but I will ask the advisers to respond for two minutes each to one or two key points.

Roger Mullin: Thank you, convener—I would have had to go on until 5 o'clock this evening.

A number of members have rightly raised the question of the fragmentation of the system and how we bring it together, make it a seamless experience and create coherence, both for individuals and at a wider social level so that we contribute to the generation of good. It strikes me that members are, in one sense, asking a fairly simple question—how do we construct a strategy? That implies that, at the moment—I agree with this—there is no coherent strategy for lifelong learning in Scotland or the UK.

The questions that Kenny MacAskill and David Mundell raised imply that one of the key targets of the committee should be to try to outline what the components of a coherent national strategy would be. Even if the committee does not dot all the i's and cross all the t's, it should come to a conclusion about what the components of the strategy should be—that would do the country an immense favour.

I will respond first to one or two comments that were made to me by Annabel Goldie. She said that I had mentioned a number of assumptions in my comments, and she wanted to know whether any other assumptions were built into current

policies. I will dodge the question slightly and say that it might be valuable for me to take a little time and write a note to the committee, saying what I think the assumptions that are built into current policies are. It is a complex matter, but there are some obvious assumptions, as I have already stated. There is an assumption in the operations of Scottish Enterprise, for example, that intermediary contracting is preferable, which moves us away from dealing with the employer. The policies also carry an assumption that the authorities know best. With some policies, individual school-leavers and employers get told precisely what form of qualification they need. They are not provided with choice in that regard. That is a rather dramatic assumption, which might need to be questioned.

There is a series of assumptions, and Annabel Goldie's question was a good one, but I would like a little more time to think about it. Annabel also asked about the evidence base. I have talked with Jim Gallacher about that. It would be particularly valuable for the committee to hear from such people as Professor David Raffae and Professor Lindsay Paterson from the University of Edinburgh. They have for many years been interested in analysing many of those areas and are aware of the inadequacies in the way in which evidence is gathered and analysed at present. Rather than pretending that I have the expertise, I will suggest whom it would be worth calling to the committee to discuss how to improve the situation.

The Convener: Thank you for that good-quality response, with good timekeeping into the bargain.

Professor Slowey: The discussion has been most stimulating. I will see what I can do with the quality of my answer and my timekeeping. I have picked out three areas on which I will comment—although not in great detail.

First, I concur with the comments that have been made about the importance of additional education in building the framework or basis for lifelong learning. The difficulty lies in where we make the interventions. Building a positive attitude to learning is not just about what happens in schools; it is also about the social and economic conditions in which young people live, including the experience of education within the family. Many of the post-19 people about whom we are talking are parents of young people who have negative attitudes, and the difficulty seems to be that we must tackle all sectors simultaneously. We must recognise the importance of schools in laying the foundation for the future, but we cannot neglect the majority of our population—the post-19 population. I might not quite have the metaphor correct, but I am trying to get at something like “the rising tide raising all the boats”.

Secondly, many members talked about supporting learners in making their choices in

different ways. Reference was made to the fact that I served as a member of the Cubie committee. When listening to the evidence that was presented to that committee, I was struck by the enormous emphasis on full-time students. In the context of the framework that we are discussing, most learners, although they might be full-time students at some point in their career, will be part-time learners as they go through work or periods of unemployment, or when they retire. Their primary identity is not, for any considerable time, necessarily that of a student. What are the funding mechanisms and how do we support learners in diverse situations?

Thirdly, I want to mention benchmarking, which the convener raised. I made the point that it is extremely timely that the committee is considering lifelong learning strategies. We have the opportunity to examine what other countries have tried to do and I am not aware of an example of a good lifelong learning strategy. I fully endorse Roger Mullin's suggestion that if, by the end of the process, Scotland has developed an approach that has the components of a strategy, that would go down in the history books.

I have a final comment on comparative information, benchmarking and our cousins south of the border. A point was made about the difficulty in encouraging people who have left formal education to keep a positive attitude to learning. The percentage of the adult population who have recently been in, or are currently engaged in, learning in Scotland is lower than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Survey results in Scotland suggest that about 33 per cent of the adult population have recently been in or are currently engaged in learning, compared with the national average of 40 per cent and the London figure of 46 per cent. Those figures could be used as benchmarks.

Dr Keep: On what the committee needs to do, I support what Roger Mullin said. The committee must be ruthless when it decides on what it will focus. There are millions of interesting issues that the committee could consider, but the problem is that the inquiry might turn into a form of tourism and the committee will look only at what interests it.

If time is finite, the committee must focus on the key issues and objectives that it wants the lifelong learning strategy to cover, and the principles that underlie it. The committee must also have some notion of a time scale and some milestones by which it will be able to follow the strategy's progress and development. I promise members that the committee will not create a finished article because the problem is too big.

The topic of the link between skills and economic development is huge. The evidence

suggests that the committee must ask what is needed in addition to more skills to make a difference to economic development. Most of the evidence suggests that, on their own, more skills make much less difference than policy makers would like to imagine. What tends to make a difference is more skills in conjunction with changes such as other forms of investment and development. I would be happy to go into that subject, but I will not do so now.

However one looks at funding, one must think about priorities, because resources are finite and there are myriad different calls upon them, which might mean slicing the cake differently, if that is what is required. There must be some thought given to the balance between the streams of funding that are targeted at different audiences. The question might be one of priorities over time. The people who are in immediate need might be different from those who have a need in the long term, so the committee might want to consider funding over time.

My final point is on the work place and ICT. Work-based learning can be good and in leading-edge organisations it is good. The problem is the large gap between the leading edge and the trailing edge; many organisations are closer to the trailing edge than to the leading edge. The demand for skills from many employers, in particular SMEs, might be more limited than we would like to imagine. That is a problem and there is an issue about the demand for skills as well as the supply of skills.

ICT has been, in many cases, oversold. It can be a useful adjunct to other traditional forms of training and it does some things very well. However, we need to bear it in mind that in businesses in the service sector, many of the skills that are required are interpersonal skills, customer care skills and so on. Those are precisely the sort of skills that ICT is not very good at formulating, because they require face-to-face interaction. What ICT is very good at is fostering traditional skills by transferring large chunks of theoretical knowledge and technical understanding via CD-ROMs. ICT can do that very cost-effectively. However, it can only scratch the surface of many other kinds of skills.

11:45

Professor Gallacher: I want to start by discussing what the focus of the work should be. Kenny MacAskill and others have pointed out the danger of getting lost by considering too many things. As Ewart Keep and Roger Mullin said, it is crucial that we develop an overall strategy. In doing so, we must first be clear about our key objectives and we must find a reasonable balance between objectives that might be in conflict. That

will lead to questions on the form of strategy and structures that one would want. People have spoken about evidence of the blurring of boundaries between different sectors—although sometimes the blurring is less than it might appear.

Major questions arise on the role of Scottish Enterprise, the local enterprise companies and employers. There will not be time to go into incredible detail, but the structures should take the range of elements into account, such as further education, higher education, Scottish Enterprise, schools, private training providers and employers. We must ask how we can pull all those elements together in a way that they are not at present. One can address such questions without getting hopelessly lost in the details.

Marilyn Livingstone spoke about funding. How can we create a funding structure—both at the institutional level and, as was said, at the level of the individual student—that will underpin and support the strategy? As Maria Slowey said, interesting questions arise on the relationship between full-time and part-time students. Where does most funding go? Most of it goes to support relatively expensive forms of full-time education.

Des McNulty and Ewart Keep spoke about ICT. ICT will be important in widening the opportunities that are available, but the visit to the UHIMI brought out many of the problems that are associated with supporting learners. I know of those problems from my experience of running a web-based degree course. ICT offers valuable opportunities, but we must acknowledge the costs.

The Convener: This meeting has been extremely useful. I think that all members are agreed that focusing on the strategy is essential. We have clear terms of reference and we have consulted widely. We must adhere to those terms of reference; if we try to go too far outside them, we will never achieve our objectives. The key point of the terms of reference is in paragraph 1 of the inquiry remit—on the need for a national strategy on lifelong learning and on what the key elements of that strategy should be. That is clearly what the focus of the inquiry will be. As members know, we have listed six or seven key questions in the general remit and those are the questions that we will set about answering.

It would be useful if the four advisers between them produced a paper for the committee on what they believe should be the strategic aims and objectives of a lifelong learning strategy. That would be extremely helpful to the committee.

Miss Goldie: I think you should have said “among them”. I point that out, because they are academics.

The Convener: Absolutely.

Such a paper would be extremely helpful in addition to the other suggestions that the advisers have made about follow-up work, such as additional witnesses. All those suggestions should be channelled through Simon Watkins to ensure that the inquiry is properly co-ordinated.

This has been a helpful meeting to kick off the inquiry. I thank all four advisers very much.

I point out to the committee that, given that we have four advisers, the *modus operandi* for ensuring that we get the maximum benefit from the advisers has led us to agree to set up regular meetings with them to prepare the agenda on lifelong learning for the committee. That is intended to ensure that the right flow of paper comes to the committee and that we cover all the necessary angles without going down too many, or any, cul-de-sacs.

The Convener: We move to item 5, which is relevant to the previous discussion, as it relates to our future work programme for the lifelong learning inquiry. A paper has been submitted for discussion.

I will go through the sections of the paper. The first section is a general one on the work programme. It is fairly straightforward.

Initial briefing papers from the Scottish Parliament information centre on various aspects of the lifelong learning inquiry have been circulated to members. All members should have them and there will be more in due course. We will try to manage the flow of paper to make it as easy as possible for members to accumulate the necessary reading material at the right time. The section on written evidence is fairly straightforward.

We hope to get the results of the research we commissioned from Blake Stevenson—the work on mapping exercises—towards the end of September. That is built into the work programme.

On meetings outwith the Parliament premises, the main point is that we have confirmed that we will go to Scottish Enterprise’s new premises at Atlantic Quay on 28 November. I remind members that the meeting will start fairly early and that after the meeting there will be an informal meeting over lunch with the board of Scottish Enterprise. I encourage all members to attend that; it could be extremely informative.

We have heard reports back on the first two case studies. One of the decisions we must take today is on the additional case studies we intend to undertake. There are two suggestions: a case study on skill shortages/business view and one on volume training. I suggest that the one on skill shortages/business view should not be treated as a case study. It is in effect a focus group session

that is being held with employers by the Scottish Council for Development and Industry to assist and inform the committee; it is not a case study per se. I suggest that we treat it separately, but agree to go ahead with it.

David Mundell: I agree that we should go ahead, but my concern with events that are held by outside bodies is that we should not fall into the trap of having only the usual suspects present to give evidence. Although we are grateful to the SCDI for organising the event, we should emphasise that we want as wide a range of people to give views as possible.

The Convener: The business sector includes the small and medium enterprise sector. Its requirements and feedback might be different from those of multinational corporations.

Elaine Thomson: It could be a useful meeting, but, as David Mundell says, we must ensure that we do not just see the usual group of people.

We should be clear about the key skill shortages, or the key industries that have skill shortages. It is obvious that the electronics industry is among those. We made a visit and heard about that earlier this year. The oil and gas industry definitely has skill shortages. Some other not so obvious areas such as construction and financial services are also involved. We could give the Scottish Council for Development and Industry a clear steer about the industries that are affected and whom we want to talk to.

Miss Goldie: I support that suggestion, otherwise the seminar will become a general, unfocused amalgam of views. Given the need for pure evidence, that is not helpful.

Does the point that Roger Mullin raised about the provision of training for business as distinct from skill shortages relate to the seminar? How easily does the business sector access training on a lifelong learning platform? That needs to be addressed.

The Convener: We need to agree on three committee members to participate in the seminar. Rather than just participate, they might meet representatives of the SCDI beforehand, to be sure that it brings together the right people and that the right questions will be asked to elicit the information. Is that agreeable?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We will select the three people once we have dealt with the other case studies, because we should share the work and ensure that it is not left to one or two people.

The next suggestion for a case study is referred to in the paper as "Volume training". The matter is self-explanatory.

Marilyn Livingstone: I agree with the suggestion in the paper, but we need to widen the study. Examining Dundee is a good suggestion—I would appreciate that—but we have talked about and had evidence sessions, albeit short, on integrating vocational education and training. I would not like the issue to be dealt with in isolation. I would like us to consider how volume training is integrated, especially with further education.

We should widen the study, even if that means a bit of extra work. We must examine the FAST-TRAC project. We cannot consider volume training and leave that out, because much work has been done on that. The project has moved on and we have heard reports about it from, for example, Scottish Enterprise. We must consider the issue of managing agents versus working directly with employers.

We should examine Fife and Dundee, but also Glasgow. I do not say that only on my behalf; we should consider the partnership working that is being used in Glasgow.

The Convener: That would be a separate study.

Marilyn Livingstone: I do not know whether the committee wants to have three case studies or one joint study and one other. I do not have any great views on the matter. I would like to widen the study. If we are to study the issue properly, we must consider what Roger Mullin said about parity of esteem of qualifications and the integration of learning. The case study will give us information on that and get us into the nitty-gritty. I suggest that we study Fife, Dundee and Glasgow.

The Convener: I agree and I suggest that we study Dundee and Fife as one exercise. I am thinking of our work load. Another three people could consider Glasgow, because the lifelong learning partnership in Glasgow goes much further than volume training. It goes into schools and is by far the most comprehensive and ambitious strategy in Scotland.

Do we agree to Marilyn Livingstone's recommendation, split into two studies?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That gives us four case studies plus the SCDI exercise. That is sufficient, unless anyone has any other suggestions. If not, is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We must decide who will be involved in the additional case studies, the SCDI exercise and the visit to Brussels. The committee agreed that it would send a small delegation of three MSPs plus a clerk to Brussels.

I will remind members about the case studies

that have been undertaken. David Mundell and Ken Macintosh went to John Wheatley College. Tavish Scott was tied up and could not go there, so I presume that he is still available for another case study. Annabel Goldie, Bill Butler and I have done stints in Inverness and Dumfries.

We need three members for the SCDI seminar, three for the Fife and Dundee case study, three for the Glasgow case study and three for the evidence-gathering trip to Brussels.

First, do members want to volunteer for a specific visit?

Tavish Scott: I will go to the SCDI seminar.

Marilyn Livingstone: I want to go on the volume training case study to Fife and Dundee, if that is possible.

Mr Macintosh: I will go on that one too.

Bill Butler: I want to go on the volume training study in Fife and Dundee.

The Convener: We need to try to have cross-party representation for each of the visits.

12:00

Des McNulty: I want to go on the Glasgow volume training visit.

David Mundell: I will go back to Glasgow for the volume training and I am happy to be involved with the SCDI seminar also, if that is necessary.

Elaine Thomson: I am interested in the SCDI seminar and I am happy to help out elsewhere.

The Convener: David Mundell, Elaine Thomson and Tavish Scott are nominated for the SCDI seminar, as that is a reasonable cross-party delegation. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: For the Fife and Dundee volume training we have Marilyn Livingstone, Ken Macintosh and Bill Butler. That is a bit weighted, party-wise. What is Kenny MacAskill's role in this?

Mr MacAskill: I would be happy to go, but it depends on dates.

The Convener: We will try to arrange it so that all three case study visits have cross-party representation. As Bill Butler has already been on a case study, I nominate Marilyn Livingstone, Ken Macintosh and Kenny MacAskill for the Fife and Dundee visit. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That leaves us with David Mundell and Des McNulty going to Glasgow, and I suggest that Duncan Hamilton also go there, if he is agreeable to that. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That gives another reasonable cross-party delegation. The committee will continue to visit Brussels from time to time, because of our remit. I was on the most recent trip in my role as committee convener. I suggest that Annabel Goldie, in her role as deputy convener, should participate in and lead the delegation on lifelong learning to Brussels. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We must pick two other members for that delegation and, ideally, we want cross-party representation. I will take nominations for the other two places.

Miss Goldie: This is when I am not allowed to say, "I would like ..."

The Convener: For logistical reasons, we have to agree this matter today. Can I have nominations? I spoke to Duncan Hamilton last week about the Brussels visit and he was quite interested in going. Is it agreeable that he goes?

Mr MacAskill: As I was there last week, I am happy for him to go on this visit.

The Convener: I nominate Duncan Hamilton.

Marilyn Livingstone: I nominate Elaine Thomson.

The Convener: Annabel Goldie, Duncan Hamilton and Elaine Thomson are nominated to go on the Brussels visit. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The next item in the work programme is policy scenario gaming. As Dr Keep is with us, we will get an update on the event and report progress to the next meeting of the committee.

The next matter is the lifelong learning convention. There are several possible dates for the convention and we have provisionally booked the Edinburgh International Conference Centre for all of them.

Miss Goldie: Are any of the dates during recess?

The Convener: One of them is, but I suggest that the latest date, 22 February 2002, is most suitable because, realistically, we need to leave ourselves enough time. Is that date agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The next matter is other activities in support of the inquiry. Let us check the recommendations to see whether we have covered everything. I will come to the detailed work programme shortly, because I know that there are one or two proposed changes.

Mr Macintosh: The Scottish Labour Party conference is on Friday 22 February.

The Convener: Is it not in March?

Marilyn Livingstone: It is in March.

Mr Macintosh: It is on 22 February.

The Convener: We could all go there instead.

David Mundell: You would need a visitor's pass, convener.

The Convener: That clash of dates presents a problem. Shall we try for the following Friday, which would be, as it is not a leap year, 1 March? Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The momentous decisions that we have to make are beyond belief.

We shall return to recommendation 1, as I know that there are some concerns about the work programme.

Recommendation 2 invites the committee to

"agree to publish written evidence on the Committee's webpage as it is received, and ... to develop the web page for the lifelong learning inquiry",

which is in line with the recommendations of our new economy report. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Recommendation 3 invites the committee to

"agree to publish the lifelong learning research commissioned by the Committee on its web page as a Committee paper in advance of the meeting on 3 October".

Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Recommendation 4 invites the committee to

"agree the arrangements for the second tranche of case study visits in early November".

We have already agreed to that.

Recommendation 5 invites the committee to nominate MSPs to conduct the case studies, which has also been done. Recommendation 6 invites us to agree a date for the lifelong learning convention, which we have done. We have also nominated three members for the visit to Brussels, which is the subject of recommendation 7.

Recommendation 8 invites the committee to

"agree to ... arrange a video-conference meeting with members of the European Parliament's Employment and Social Affairs Committee",

which is currently discussing a lifelong learning framework for Europe. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Recommendation 9 invites the committee to

"develop proposals for the Committee's website to include a section dedicated to the lifelong learning inquiry".

Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The final recommendation is that the committee agrees

"to make the arrangements for the inquiry public and available to all those who are interested."

Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We now turn to the detailed work programme. Marilyn Livingstone has some proposed changes.

Marilyn Livingstone: I know that other colleagues will want to explore my proposals in more depth. I presume that the session during which we would take evidence on the consumer side from the Scottish Trades Union Congress would not cover the Educational Institute of Scotland or the Association of University Teachers.

The Convener: No, it would not.

Marilyn Livingstone: Given some of the evidence that we have heard on governance and pay, we should invite the EIS and the AUT to put forward their views. I will let other members go into detail on that. Another group that we might consider taking evidence from is local partnership organisations.

The Convener: Let us discuss the groups one at a time. Are you suggesting that in addition to the STUC we should hear from some of the other unions that are directly involved?

Bill Butler: It would be useful to hear their views on governance and McCrone, if we can fit them in.

The Convener: Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Marilyn Livingstone: We also considered taking evidence on local partnership organisations, but that might have been overtaken by the Glasgow case study.

The Convener: Perhaps we can put that on a back burner.

Marilyn Livingstone: Yes. We should also consider local authorities, as adult guidance and careers are big elements of the lifelong learning issue. I know that we have taken evidence on careers provision, which we can carry over. I suggest that we consider the evidence that we

took on careers and on SHEFC and funding.

The Convener: There is an omission from the timetable. The list for the meeting on 12 December should include Community Learning Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

Marilyn Livingstone: Okay. Our advisers talked about the importance of careers guidance and support. We must ensure that we consider that, particularly as part of the social inclusion agenda. We should use the evidence that we have taken and consider it further.

The Convener: Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Marilyn Livingstone: The evidence from the ASC and Universities Scotland will be crucial. We feel that time will be rather tight if they have only one hour between them. If we want to explore the issues properly we should give each organisation an hour.

The Convener: Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Marilyn Livingstone: The other group that is missing is the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector is responsible for much first steps provision.

The Convener: We might ask the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations to co-ordinate that. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I have another suggestion, which I have already discussed with the clerk. It will be too much to hear from both funding councils, Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise the day that we meet in Glasgow. I think we should reschedule the evidence from the funding councils. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Des McNulty: The programme could be a bit top-heavy with umbrella organisations. I am more interested in taking evidence from people who are a bit closer to the delivery process. For example, Universities Scotland will give us the considered—and legitimate—view of all universities, but taking evidence from such organisations will not allow us to get close to the people who are actively involved in dealing with the lifelong learning agenda, which is what we would like to do.

The Convener: That was the purpose of the case studies: we agreed to undertake them, and deliberately organised matters in that way, for that precise reason.

I want to make a general point. We must ensure that we consider the consumer side as well as the

producer side and that we do not simply take the establishment view. Perhaps we should ask appropriate organisations to bring witnesses who can give front-line evidence, rather than the usual senior people. I will not say old men in suits, because someone took offence when I said that last week, but members know what I mean.

Des McNulty: I will follow up that point, if I may. That may be our aim, but it is often not achieved. We would still end up with people who present the institutional view. Can we encourage the people whom we invite to give oral evidence to put their institutional views in their written submissions and, when we question them, to focus on the themes that we identify for our inquiry? Before we have held too many meetings, I hope that the advisers and committee members will have identified the key themes that we want to consider.

We should try to ensure that the bodies that we invite know that we will be looking for evidence from them on specific areas. We will be quite happy to receive their general institutional views on the broad scope of the inquiry but, from our point of view, it would be better to receive those views in writing rather than witnesses taking up the committee's time by going through stuff orally that could have been put in writing.

Simon Watkins (Clerk): All the bodies will submit written evidence, as will many others. As part of the process, we will use our advisers to help assess that evidence and to pull from it evidence that may be from a more grass-roots level, which we think is particularly useful or helpful. We will slot the people who submit such evidence into the programme later. We deliberately left some space in the programme for that purpose.

The Convener: I asked Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, at the chairman and chief executive level, to give us evidence on the volume training programmes that they deliver. They are Scotland's national economic development agencies and, if we are to be internationally competitive, we need to know where they think the education and lifelong learning sector must be in five or 10 years' time. They have agreed to widen their evidence accordingly.

Before I bring in Annabel Goldie, I have a final comment. We also need to build some time into the programme in the first three or four months of the new year for an update on progress made on broadband. The Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning suggested that during last week's debate. Perhaps we should seek such an update in February or March—we can decide nearer the time. I am not suggesting that we should have a big inquiry; rather, I am suggesting that we should check progress, in the same way

as we are checking progress in respect of the work of the local enterprise companies. Do members agree, in principle?

Members indicated agreement.

Miss Goldie: I want to raise a point that is closely related to the point raised by Des McNulty. I, too, was slightly concerned about the top-heavy nature of some of the witnesses and about receiving institutional evidence. The local economic fora, which we will meet on 23 January 2002 and which were devised by the committee, were never meant to be anything other than broadly strategic. They are certainly not concerned with the nitty-gritty of delivery or consumption.

To be frank, I would prefer to get direct evidence from consumers and providers in the area, as Des McNulty suggested. That might involve asking the Scottish Chambers of Commerce to produce members from a geographical spread. I want to hear from those at the coalface of consumption, and we are not providing for that elsewhere. The draft schedule lists

"Lloyds TSB and A.N Other large industrial employer".

We know what many large industrial employers will tell us. The mystery is what happens further down the chain.

The Convener: We will take that point on board in our lifelong learning inquiry. When we discuss the longer-term work programme, I suggest that we should be clear about who we want to give evidence on the local economic forums. I am reminded by the clerk that this discussion is primarily about the work programme for our lifelong learning inquiry.

David Mundell: I may have missed this point, but will we be able to speak to our advisers between now and 12 December?

The Convener: That depends. As you know, when we selected the advisers, we based our decision on their specialisms in addition to their general expertise. We will have on-going discussions with them on the most appropriate adviser—or advisers—to attend committee meetings, depending on who is giving evidence.

David Mundell: Are you saying that we will have access to the advisers throughout the inquiry?

The Convener: Of course—it will be horses for courses.

Are members happy with those changes? Do we agree the work programme?

Members indicated agreement.

12:15

Meeting continued in private until 12:39.

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