ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE

Wednesday 14 November 2001
(*Morning*)

Session 1

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 14 November 2001

ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE
26th 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)
*Brian Fitzpatrick (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
*Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)
*Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD)
*Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab)

*attended

WITNESSES

John Burt (Association of Scottish Colleges)
David Caldwell (Universities Scotland)
Tom Kelly (Association of Scottish Colleges)
Janet Lowe (Association of Scottish Colleges)
Professor Lindsay Paterson
Professor Bill Stevely (Universities Scotland)
Lord Sutherland of Houndwood (Universities Scotland)

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 14 November 2001

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:01*]

The Convener (Alex Neil): Good morning and welcome to the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's 26th meeting in 2001. I have received apologies from Marilyn Livingstone, who unfortunately cannot join us this morning. Duncan Hamilton, who is currently detained, will join us later.

Agenda item 1 is reports on our lifelong learning inquiry case studies. The written reports are not ready, because the case studies were fairly extensive. Does the committee agree to defer consideration of the reports until 28 November?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: The implication of that decision is that we will have an extremely busy agenda at our next meeting, which will be held on 28 November in Glasgow, at Scottish Enterprise's new headquarters in the Broomielaw. Does the committee agree that the agenda item on the global connections strategy, which was planned for that meeting, be deferred until a date in January or February, to be agreed by the committee? We all agree that our priority must be the lifelong learning inquiry. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Lifelong Learning Inquiry

The Convener: We have three sets of witnesses today and we have received appropriate written submissions. I welcome Lord Sutherland of Houndwood, who is appearing on behalf of Universities Scotland. The previous time that he gave evidence to the committee, he was a simple "Sir". On behalf of the committee, I congratulate him belatedly on his peerage. We also have Professor Bill Stevely, who is convener of the teaching and learning committee of Universities Scotland, and a face that is well known to the committee—David Caldwell. I believe that Lord Sutherland will lead.

Lord Sutherland of Houndwood (Universities Scotland): I am convener of Universities Scotland, but we are here as a team and, with the committee's agreement, we will share questions and discussion.

First, I thank the committee for the opportunity to contribute to its thinking and work on an exceptionally important topic for us and for Scotland's economy. We have no doubt that Scotland's future depends on lifelong learning. The phrase "knowledge economy" is spoken easily, but it is true that it is our future. Knowledge is our business—it is our living, in the university sector.

The committee has the paper that we submitted and we are happy to take questions on that. It would be helpful if I could highlight two or three issues first.

Our thousands of colleagues in the university and higher education sector do excellent work. That is the judgment of those of us who work with them and see them as not being sufficiently rewarded. The sector's success depends on the quality of staff at all levels, from those who service the buildings to those who teach, conduct research and so on; it is important that if the committee thinks the same as we do, it lets our colleagues in the sector know. They are a hard-pressed group who have been working in difficult circumstances for the past 15 to 20 years, and it would be very useful if we could take back your good wishes to them.

As I have implied, there have been massive changes in higher education. For example, circumstances have changed for individual students. Most people who were at university many years ago would hardly recognise the places in which we now operate, given the current volume and turnover of students and the financial and academic pressure on them. It is a different world. That change is due to the diminution of resources both for students and for those who teach them.

Although I will not rehearse that point—this is not a whinge session—I should point out that it is part of the change that we have had to cope with. Given that there has been a cut in unit costs of between 40 and 50 per cent per student, I once again pay tribute to my colleagues who teach, work in, and service the sector.

The number of institutions has changed; there has been a dramatic expansion in the number of universities and colleges. However, even within the 10 years for which the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council has been operating, there has been a series of mergers, which has been the sector's response to finding ways of processing and progressing the provision of higher education in Scotland. The committee probably knows about those mergers, but I am happy to detail them if members want me to.

We have been pleased by, but are not complacent about, the international attention that has been paid to our participation rates in higher education. Currently, 49 per cent of the age cohort in Scotland attend one or other of the higher education institutions; that figure is higher than in most countries in the world. Furthermore, 84 to 85 per cent of students finish their degrees. Committee members might wonder about the other 16 per cent, but our completion rate is remarkably good compared with other jurisdictions across the world, especially since almost half the age cohort enters higher education. That is another sign of the dedication of my colleagues, who have accomplished that despite having less money for each student.

South of the border, people look with some envy—and mostly sotto voce admiration—at the completion and participation rates in Scotland. I know that, because I sit on the Higher Education Funding Council for England. In England, there is an age participation rate of 35 per cent and, after sitting in on the council's discussions, I think that it has hit the wall. The council does not know what to do next to increase that figure and has been finding out what it can learn from Scotland. I am not sure whether the equivalent Westminster committee has asked you for assistance, but there is no doubt that the English funding council is looking closely at what the Scottish sector does because of its success in extending the availability of higher education.

That said, we know that we have further to go, and that there are sectors of the population that we wish to penetrate further. I came from a council house on the wrong side of Aberdeen, so I know what it means to progress through an education system and have the opportunities that education offers. We are all concerned about increasing those opportunities and would be delighted to accept any advice or help that the committee can give us. As for what that means for lifelong learning, one in four of the employed work force in Scotland is a graduate or has a higher education qualification. That percentage is good, and if we compare it with equivalent figures from elsewhere, we can see that Scotland is making real progress in that area.

Ten per cent of our intake across the sector comes with higher national diploma qualifications and experience. We reckon that, of the 20 per cent or so of the cohort who go for HND qualifications, half proceed to university. It would be interesting to know about the other half. We do not take the view that everybody automatically wants to go to university, but at least half of those who study for an HND proceed to the Scottish higher education sector.

There are lots of local one-to-one relationships and regional consortia between higher education and further education. We would like to improve those, and we would like there to be more. We work closely with our colleagues. The FE sector is clearly going through a period of transition—sorting out its strategy and direction—but the evidence, which we all benefit from, is that good students come through the individual relationships and regional consortia. I am happy for Bill Stevely and David Caldwell to expand on that if that would be useful.

Graduates progress into interesting and useful roles in society. After six months, 95 per cent of graduates are either in jobs or in further training and education—lifelong learning, if you like. We watch that target closely, because what many people want from university is the capacity to progress and play a useful role in society.

One area on which we would value your help and advice is engineering. We often hear talk of there being a shortage of engineers in Scotland. We have done some research into that, and one of the problems that we found was that half of those who graduate as engineers do not become engineers. That is an important and interesting statistic and we need to examine why that is the case. We all have our surmises. It might be rates of pay. It might be the lumpiness in the engineering profession—for example, the oil industry inevitably goes up and down. Bill Stevely could talk about that in some detail. The electronics business, as we have seen, can go up and down. However, we are producing more graduates than are finding jobs as engineers.

If there is a work force problem, we need to sit down with employers, perhaps with your help and brokerage, and see what can be done about it. Perhaps employers are not paying enough—I do not know—but there are issues to be examined. That is not to say that engineering students are wasting their time, because if an engineer

becomes an MSP or an investment banker, they will probably be better at their job, because the training that they get is very useful. Interestingly, quite a lot of engineers become vice-chancellors, although I do not think that there are any guilty parties at the table at the moment.

The higher education sector has a major involvement in continuing professional development. We have been in the vanguard in producing graduates in some professions—most recently in nursing, in particular, and social work—but it goes beyond producing a cohort of graduates in those professions. With teachers, nurses, social workers, lawyers, dentists, doctors, architects and so on—the list goes on—we are in the CPD business. Virtually all the colleagues whom I talk to see CPD as an area of expansion in higher education. CPD is an important area for us, as well as for the wider community.

We have specific partnerships with companies. Figures from SHEFC estimate that about £36 million is spent by Scottish companies on professional development links with the HE sector in Scotland, so companies are investing in their staff and they are looking to us to help. I would like the figure to be £136 million, but £36 million is not a bad start if you examine the overall spend on staff development in many companies. I put that on the table as something that we view as important, and on which we would value advice and feedback.

For all of us, lifelong learning begins at primary school. I go back to my own experience. That is where lifelong learning started, and if we get that right—and we want to help, not just in teacher training but in all sorts of ways through the whole school system—lifelong learning will become a natural attitude to life. It will have to, because the world is changing so fast.

The Convener: Thank you.

Stewart Sutherland wrote to me in his capacity as principal and vice-chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, inviting the committee to hold one of its meetings at the university in the next year or so. When we discuss our work schedule for next year at a later meeting, I will recommend to the committee that we take up that invitation.

Given your remarks about staff in universities, you will be glad to know that a debate is scheduled in the Parliament for next Thursday on the major employment issue of contract researchers.

Lord Sutherland: I look forward to that.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): I should declare an interest: I am a member of the court of the University of Strathclyde. As I speak, there has been no notice of summary ejection.

In your submission, the second paragraph of the summary of conclusions states:

"The main barrier to lifelong learning is demand, not supply."

I want to tease out that statement. Is it a suggestion that the current supply volume is adequate?

10:15

Lord Sutherland: We had two points in mind, the first of which is that universities and higher education institutions have learned that simply to offer courses and then to find out whether anyone wants them is not the right approach. We have also learned that we can work with individual companies and sectors to draw up specific programmes. A classic example of business and universities interacting is the Alba Centre programme, for which four universities got together with Scottish Enterprise to set up a high-powered training programme at masters level.

We want demand from professions, companies and the public sector to grow. When we enter into detailed discussions, we find that we can produce courses—sometimes short and sometimes degree level—that meet the bill. That is where the £36 million comes from.

Professor Bill Stevely (Universities Scotland): I have a point about the social inclusion aspect of the agenda. Nowadays, universities are willing to accept people with a wide range of non-standard qualifications as well as the usual school qualifications. To reach those who do not come into universities or higher education, we must get into schools and work with parents to try to encourage people to believe that higher education is a possibility for them and to raise expectations. Many initiatives that are supported by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council are aimed at increasing the demand.

In some areas of higher education, for example engineering and science, more qualified people are available than go into the field. Encouraging youngsters to choose engineering as a career is a matter of increasing demand. The problem is not that we need more courses, because plenty of courses are available. We must encourage people at an early stage to consider science as a positive thing that they want to continue. That encouragement must start early in schools—it is too late for us to ask 16 or 17-year-olds to take up science.

Miss Goldie: I asked the question because, to be perfectly honest, when I read the Universities Scotland submission, I was not clear about the

ultimate game plan. Paragraph 7 describes the healthy level of entrants to higher education—49 per cent—and paragraph 40 implies that the universities want to expand that. I want to clarify where that expansion would end. Do the universities think that the optimum situation would be 100 per cent?

Lord Sutherland: That is not the view that we suggested. We believe that we must discuss—with the committee, which has executive responsibility, and employers—the economic and cultural shape of Scottish society in the future. In that context, we must discuss what the demand will be for education at all levels, including higher education. We have exceeded the targets that anyone could have predicted 10 years ago, let alone 20 years. We are open to building the kind of society in which every 18-year-old goes to university, but we are not claiming that Scotland will somehow fail without reaching that figure. The issue is for discussion and, in a sense, for the Parliament to think about closely.

David Caldwell (Universities Scotland): It is important to separate off two elements. First, we are doing well with our high participation rate for full-time undergraduate students. We accept that the scope for further expansion is modest, but it exists. We know that representation of certain social groups in undergraduate courses is much lower than that of other social groups. There is a pool of talent that is, as yet, not fully exploited. Universities are keen to do what they can to exploit that talent more fully, but they will need help because the barriers to bringing students from those social groups into higher education are often cultural, social and financial and are not put up by the sector. That is one side; there is room for modest expansion. As Lord Sutherland said, no one would suggest that the figure should go up to 100 per cent.

The other element is part-time and lifelong learning, which may continue after somebody has a degree. We believe that the opportunity exists for a considerable increase in that sector. What is more, we believe that, economically, it is important for Scotland that people's learning and skills continue to be updated after graduation as employment patterns become more diverse. It is becoming less the case that somebody enters a single career for life; there is much more emphasis on adaptability.

I draw Miss Goldie's attention to one important piece of evidence, which supports our contention that the problem is at the demand end rather than at the supply end. The recent report of the joint lifelong learning group was an initiative of the two funding councils and the two enterprise organisations in Scotland. The key finding of that report was that there was a demand problem that had to be addressed. I endorse that heartily.

Miss Goldie: I want to pursue the issue of social inclusion, and I refer to paragraph 38 of the Universities Scotland submission. Do the witnesses feel that social inclusion is being targeted adequately in a focused manner and, if not, what do they suggest?

Lord Sutherland: I have two points to make on that. Bill Stevely and David Caldwell may wish to add something.

A personal view is that some of the leverage should be put in the hands of schools and local communities, which should be given help to approach the institutions that they want their local folk and pupils to go to in the long term. I have spoken to a number of head teachers and teachers about that and there are some good ideas out there in the community. A bit of leverage from that end would be a way of trying to bridge what is now a significant gap.

To be honest, I think that we have reached the edges of those who can, by modest effort and investment, be brought into the sector. The gap is now quite a bit larger; that is what people are also finding in England. One of the ways in which I want to approach bridging that gap is by having real partnership with schools—some of the spend might belong there. That is not a Universities Scotland view, because we have not debated the matter in detail, but I see that as one of the ways to go.

At the same time, good innovative pilot schemes are going on throughout Scotland. We could give some examples of those. I do not want to talk specifically about the University of Aberdeen, but Bill Stevely might want to fill in on that.

Professor Stevely: One of the initiatives in our area involves collaboration between the University of Aberdeen, the Robert Gordon University, further education and, importantly, Aberdeen City Council. That initiative has enabled us to work more effectively with schools, including primary schools, than we might otherwise have been able to do. We have to evaluate that work and ensure that it is effective, but it is the kind of partnership that offers hope that we will be able to deal with some of those difficult issues.

Miss Goldie: Universities Scotland presumably has an overall objective on behalf of its member institutions. Should the provision of higher education be driven by the need to supply higher education in the abstract, or should it be driven by recognition of the current and potential needs of the economy?

Lord Sutherland: I am not sure that those drivers are in tension. Higher education is one of the main factors in building economies; that was

increasingly the case in the last quarter of the previous century and will be the case in this century. Economies can be built on the availability of raw products to sell; we still have some oil and that is good. Economies can be built on cheap labour, which is no longer Scotland's game, nor should we want to revert to that, or they can be built on what people call the knowledge economy. The last of those options fits with a vibrant, lively higher education system, which is what we want to be, and, up to a point, what we think we are. We have a lot to learn and much progress to make.

Creative, integrative thinking is required if you are bringing a new product to market or setting up a new company. You must think things through, not take a game plan that has been laid out in a textbook and drop it on to an economic situation. Those are exactly the skills that are required of good students. Educating students, as distinct from training them, requires them to think through the boundaries of their subject and to anticipate the next question, not just answer the question that the teacher has asked. That is what higher education, per se, is about. Those skills are consonant with the skills that the economy of the future needs.

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): Paragraph 1 in the introduction of the Universities Scotland submission states:

"the evidence shows that lifelong learning in Scotland is not 'broken' so we must not waste time trying to find things to 'fix'".

Do I take it that you think that we are wasting our time?

Lord Sutherland: No. Improvement is different from picking up a broken vessel. Improvement is what we are after.

Tavish Scott: In the light of your paragraph on graduate supply, would it be fair to say that the problems are at the demand end and that there are no problems with graduates coming out of the system? I take your point about anecdote as opposed to evidence, but we have had considerable evidence—especially last week, from the chambers of commerce and from other business sectors—that illustrates the problems that businesses and companies in all sectors are finding.

Lord Sutherland: Of course we are not whiter than white, nor is business. There must be an integrated discussion. We want to be responsive. Where the system is working, it is working well. The £36 million that Scottish business currently invests in us, for professional development, is a sign that there is some satisfaction and that a market is at work.

If the committee has received evidence from the chambers of commerce, please give it to us. I would love to have that evidence for my own institution and I am sure that my colleagues from other institutions would also like to have it. Let us look in detail at where the problems are and have a discussion with colleagues. We do that in a number of forums. If there is hard evidence, we would love to have it, so that we can do something about it.

Tavish Scott: That is fine. Our evidence is all in the *Official Report*, so it is public and available.

At a recent event, a man who was involved in running a pharmaceutical company gave me an example. I think I am right in saying that he said that there are four schools of pharmacy in Scottish universities. I note the points in your submission that pick up this point. His contention was that the Scottish system does not produce enough pharmacists. It is not a question of pay, because pharmacists are extremely well paid when they leave university. I am taking one sector and I know that it is probably unfair to consider the matter in that way. His contention, from a business perspective, is that we are not meeting the demand for pharmacists.

Lord Sutherland: We think that there are two schools of pharmacy in Scotland. If there is a shortage, we should sit down with the funding council to consider creating additional places. We would love to talk about that.

Professor Stevely: I will comment about pharmacy, since one of the schools of pharmacy is in my institution. The students who go through it end up with jobs. Most of them end up as professional pharmacists. My understanding is that four new schools of pharmacy are opening up in England over the next two or three years. One of the issues that we have addressed elsewhere is the fact that a number of Scottish graduates go south of the border for careers. We would have to be careful about greatly expanding our pharmacy complement, because I think fewer graduates will go over the border.

Where skills gaps exist, we are willing to talk to people and examine the evidence. My institution was involved in conducting a study of skills gaps for the oil industry—there are such gaps in the oil industry. We talk to the industry. I am a member of OPITO—the Offshore Petroleum Industry Training Organisation—which is the national training organisation that looks after the oil industry. We try to ensure that our links enable us to go back into the institution and make the course provision more suitable.

Part of the agenda is that industry will have to ensure that it is attractive and that it does not just turn the tap on and off. The next group of graduates coming along is aware of what has happened two years in front of it, which has been

a problem in several cases. That will help ensure that graduates are willing and ready to go into careers in some of the areas where skills gaps exist.

10:30

David Caldwell: I draw attention to the fact that it is important to bear in mind the cross-border effect that Professor Stevely has mentioned. A striking piece of evidence is the work that is being undertaken by Sir Gareth Roberts and Treasury civil servants into the supply of engineers and scientists. Sir Gareth and his team have examined the situation in England and have made international and cross-border comparisons. It is interesting that their interim findings are that there is a problem with the short supply of scientists and engineers in England. When they looked at the Scottish situation, they concluded that there is no comparable shortage—the numbers are about right—and that they would be happy if they had the same sort of balance across the border.

The difficulty for us is that the labour market extends throughout the UK and—these days—beyond. Therefore, the fact that we are a net exporter of certain types of graduate is a significant factor that we must take account of.

Tavish Scott: Professor Stevely, I will pick up your point about links with business. You gave the example of the oil industry; I would not wish to steal Elaine Thomson's thunder on that. Will you describe how the process could be improved between the higher education sector and the business sector—including small, medium and large organisations? Or do you think the system is adequate in finding mechanisms to bridge the gaps that we come across?

Professor Stevely: The system can be improved. There is a lot of good practice, but the study that was done recently for OPITO is the kind of thing that needs to be continued on a regular basis. In the oil industry, for example, groups must sit down together. A suitable comparison is the way in which the national health service is beginning to address more definitively not only how staff are recruited initially, but how their professional development is continued. As a sector, the health service can give better feedback to universities and FE colleges—which are also engaged in training people for aspects of the health service—on what they will require in the future. If we can get sector groups to do that more regularly in dialogue with Universities Scotland and others—as the electronics industry has done in the past—that would be a big help.

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): I was interested to hear Lord Sutherland and Professor Stevely mention widening access in their initial statements and in their responses to committee members. In paragraphs 15 and 16 of your submission, you say that access initiatives are highly developed in the higher education sector. You mention that 57 per cent of higher education institutions offer summer school provision for school pupils. I am aware of that, as I was invited to the graduation ceremony of the Strathclyde University summer school at Jordanhill campus in my constituency. All that is positive.

You say that you attract

"17 per cent of students from areas which don't traditionally have a lot of students compared to a UK average of 12 per cent".

What more can be done to increase that percentage in those particular areas? Lord Sutherland mentioned that he came from such an area. So did I. How do we raise that percentage and make a greater impact?

Lord Sutherland: This Parliament has done something very significant by going back to basics and increasing schoolteachers' pay. The issue is the quality of teachers and a proper reward for the immense amount of work that they do. It used to be fashionable to knock schoolteachers. I am glad that they are now being rewarded nearer a level that lets the nation recognise their importance.

What happens at the early stages of education and throughout school is absolutely critical. However, the problem concerns not just schools, but the community itself. For example, because of continuing unemployment, aspiration has been drained out of some communities. Such comments are not all that helpful, because we would all love to do something tomorrow that changed the situation. The universities want to get in there; they have planned many school visits and carry out a lot of work on specific projects. The question is how we harness that energy.

Bill Butler: I acknowledge that there are cultural impediments, if I can put it that way, and that intervention, especially at S3 and S4, is very important, but besides tackling particular attitudes and encouraging people into higher education, have the universities examined the mechanics of the problem? For example, might they recognise that potential students from the same areas that you and I came from have a disadvantage? Might they reconsider entry qualifications in light of the socio-economic background?

Lord Sutherland: Entry qualifications are a very important issue. We do not want to tell people, "It's all right to take this course, even though there is a knowledge gap" unless we can deal with that gap. Otherwise, the risk is that the student in question will not complete the degree. It is essential not just to get on to the course, but to get out successful at the other end.

My experience is that some of the best access courses have involved a year's joint activity with Stevenson College. In such courses, students develop necessary skills and deal with some of the gaps to ensure that, when they enter university, their completion rate is just as good as that of any other group of students. Although such work requires investment, it is worth it.

My other point relates to what Bill Stevely said. Our biggest problem has been expanding that sort of course to subjects such as science and engineering. It is easier to get people up to speed in subjects such as humanities, social science, politics, business studies and law, which are more straightforward. If people do not have the basic numerical skills or have not received an introduction to the sciences, getting them through the door is the first problem. Perhaps they need longer. We are all working at this issue. I mentioned the access course link with Stevenson College as an example that really works, but we need both ideas and investment to push those ideas through.

Bill Butler: Mr Caldwell mentioned part-time education, which the committee sees as an important aspect of lifelong learning. It has not been very well developed at undergraduate level in Scottish universities and it is not really addressed in your submission. What role could Scottish universities play in the development of undergraduate part-time education and its contribution to lifelong learning?

David Caldwell: There is a great deal of opportunity for development. I should first point out that there has been a lot of development recently and that part-time undergraduate programmes are much more widely available. There are very few subjects for which anyone interested in studying part time at undergraduate level would not find a programme somewhere in Scotland.

Bill Butler: Are you satisfied with that level of growth, or is there room for more growth?

David Caldwell: Although there is scope for further development, we should bear in mind that demand is a very important factor. Quite understandably, the demand remains primarily for full-time undergraduate programmes. There is demand for part-time programmes; it is rather less than that for full-time programmes but, in recent years, institutions have been responding creatively to that demand and considering new methods of learning, such as e-learning, to enable people to access modules at undergraduate and other levels when it is not convenient for them to attend an institution full time. I am sure that there will be opportunities to expand that further.

Professor Stevely: We still have the traditional evening class attendance for part-time education. The problem for people who wish to study part time for degrees is that, very often, they are in full-time employment. It is not all that easy to travel for evening classes, even to somewhere such as Aberdeen. We are therefore increasingly engaged in distance learning, sometimes supported by electronic technology, to enable people to access part-time courses. We are not unique in that—far from it.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I want to continue in the same vein as my colleague, Bill Butler, but before I do I want to agree with Lord Sutherland, who started by paying tribute to the excellence of the sector. In committees such as this, it is easy to focus on problems and to miss the chance to acknowledge the excellence that is being achieved.

I accept the general drift of the witnesses' submission, which suggests that we should build on what already exists rather than aspire to more radical solutions—although I think that we will hear of such solutions from one of your colleagues, Professor Paterson. However, in certain areas, if we focus on achievement we may not be doing enough to acknowledge the problems that exist and the solutions that are needed. Bill Butler touched on several such issues. Particular issues are the differences between the post-1992 and the pre-1992 universities; the differences—even now—between vocational and academic education; and the different cultural experiences of arts undergraduates and students going into further education at college. Is it up to the universities to do more to support students to overcome those barriers? They are barriers not only for the student but for the university.

Lord Sutherland: Of course. That is a fair question, but the difficulty in answering it is that any positive answer can sound complacent, and that is the last thing I want to do, for the reasons that I have already given. A lot of things are going on. You talked about pre-1992 and post-1992; the University of Edinburgh is pre-1992, so—

Mr Macintosh: Pre-1692, I suspect.

Lord Sutherland: Pre-1592, even—but we are not the oldest, not by a long way. We are not all that old, but the line I take is that we were the first civic university: we were set up by the citizens of Edinburgh to serve the community and we have not forgotten that.

We have a very active schools liaison department. It spends time out in the schools at four or five different levels. In the fourth and fifth years it meets parents and students, in the third year it meets teachers—there is a whole programme that I could spell out in detail if members like. The department goes into schools and sits down with the parents of pupils in different

age groups, tells them what university is like and discusses problems that could arise and how to handle them. We put money on the table. We are raising money for scholarships to help people, because the worry is often financial. People think that they will leave university with debts, but if we can put £1,000 a year on the table, it is a good start. There are practical ways of helping.

We are involved directly—indeed, we set it up initially—with LEAPS, which is the Lothian equal access programme for schools. It involves summer schools and year-round activities that we share with our three sister institutions in Edinburgh and with the FE colleges. We talk constantly to the FE colleges. I have ensured that we have a headmaster—who is from West Lothian—on our university court, precisely to have school input to the thinking at the most strategic level of the court. He is very good at providing that. He draws us up sharp.

Do you want me to go into more detail? I am trying to communicate that this is a real issue for us. We are not leaving it sitting about. If you have specific suggestions, we would love to take them on board and put them alongside the raft of things that we currently do.

Mr Macintosh: Part-time education is one area on which you have commented. Another, which Bill Butler also mentioned, is accreditation and the gatekeeper mentality of universities, and therefore the barrier that accreditation poses to many students, which leads to difficulties with the portability of qualifications and recognising quality. A lot of work is being done on the qualifications framework. Do you support that work? Will it provide a solution?

10:45

Lord Sutherland: We all support it. In fact, we were delighted that the Garrick and Dearing reports identified what was then in place—the Scottish credit accumulation and transfer scheme, or SCOTCAT—as a European leader in the area.

The whole process has developed since then with our input. Take the case of part-time students. There is a market element, as David Caldwell has stressed. What is the demand for part-time education? There is a local issue. If my university moved into part-time undergraduate degrees, Napier University would not thank us. That is because the size of the market in Edinburgh is such that it is currently being met by an institution that does it very well. You might say, "You should do it too" but that would not necessarily expand the market. I talk to my colleagues in other universities about this issue. Regional policies and consortia are required, which is what we have through the Lothian equal access programme for schools. Much the same is true for the north-east.

The Convener: I will bring you in David, but I need to speed things up a wee bit. Could you make it quick? I do not want to cut people off, but I have four other members who wish to speak.

David Caldwell: I will be quick. I just want to underline an important point, which is our commitment to the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. Not only are we firmly committed to it, we have led its development. As Lord Sutherland said, the higher education sector—through SCOTCAT—led the way, and is still doing so. By the beginning of 2003-04, which in terms of educational structures is not far away, the higher education sector will have calibrated all its learning by SCOTCAT points and by level, which are the two critical elements that you must have for the qualifications framework. Those are what will facilitate people moving across the climbing frame that the framework provides. The HE sector will have achieved that by 2003-04, and the target that we have set for ourselves is that as much as possible learning in Scotland, in all sectors, will be calibrated in the same way. We are firmly committed to that.

Mr Macintosh: I have one final point. There is little in your paper on governance. Lindsay Paterson touched on it in his paper, which you may not have had a chance to see.

Lord Sutherland: No, I have not.

Mr Macintosh: The point is that we are trying to establish how to create a strategic framework in which the whole of further and higher education can operate. That may mean creating a new body or adapting one of the existing bodies by expanding its functions. What would be your view on that, particularly on how the universities as independent institutions with their own modes of governance would work with that body? Do you think, as many have suggested, that the supposed independence of universities should be curtailed in many ways?

Lord Sutherland: For a start, if you are dealing with the statutory responsibilities of universities, legislation would be involved. You may want to do that; I do not know. Our role would depend on the type of body. I am carrying out a review of higher education in Hong Kong. Exactly the same issues are coming up. We are debating whether there should be one funding council or two, because they are going to set up a big FE sector. Eight thousand miles does not change the issues all that much. I would be interested to see what you do, because I am making recommendations for them out there.

The Convener: Perhaps you could give us advance notice of your recommendations so that they can go in our report.

Lord Sutherland: The independence of institutions relates to financial independence, but not only to that. I guess that, on average, for most universities, about 40 per cent of their money comes from SHEFC. We need the freedom to build on that. For my institution, one third of funding comes from the funding council. We need the freedom to obtain the other £200 million that we get. We get about £100 million from the funding council and we build another £200 million. If we were terribly closely constrained, we could not build that. At least £100 million of that money comes from outside Scotland, so it is inward investment. You need to leave us room to do that.

People outside Scotland value the things we do and pay money for them. That is the general principle that would lead me to ask, "Is it constraining or is it liberating? Would we be able to build on the public moneys that we receive in that way?"

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I want to say for the record that I was a bit troubled by the tone of your submission. I did not feel that it was complacent, but some of the statements, such as the one to which Tavish Scott referred, verged on the arrogant. They were not backed up by fact. We sometimes have to deal with perceptions and reality, but it gave me the impression that universities are a bit arrogant and inflexible in relation to the sector as a whole. While they are willing to work with others, they will do so only on their own terms.

Lord Sutherland: You would need to give me examples of that.

David Mundell: So you do not accept that that is a perception?

Lord Sutherland: We want to deal with reality. If we are getting it wrong we must know where we are getting it wrong. A public relations battle is one thing, but if we are not collaborating as we should we need to know specifically in what ways you think we should be changing our practice. We have changed a lot. I have made it plain that we have many changes ahead of us. We need to be specific.

I had some correspondence with someone in Scottish Enterprise who made similar claims about our relationship with business. I said, "Give me some examples. If my university is doing what you say is thought to be the case, tell me and I will do something about it. But if it is a PR battle, that is dealt with in different ways." I hope that I am not dodging your question, because it is important for us to get it right. We are willing to learn.

David Mundell: That was an interesting response, from which I am sure we will draw our own conclusions.

I raise a point in relation to some of the things that Mr Caldwell touched on. There seems to be an inherent problem in what you can achieve in the provision of education and lifelong learning. There are some figures to show that education is the fifth biggest business in Scotland. In Scotland we have what might be called global brands of institutions, which people from the rest of the UK, Europe and around the world come to Scotland for. How can we achieve a balance between having those brand leader institutions, which people accept will provide what they want on their curriculum vitae or the sort of learning that they need for their careers or lives, and a different thing, which is providing education for the population of Scotland?

Although Mr Fitzpatrick and I were very impressed with an institution we visited at the beginning of the week, it has not educationally benefited the population in the immediately surrounding area. How can we get the balance right between having Scottish education as a successful business and bringing in the inward investment you talked about and, at the same time, providing the education and skills we need for the people of Scotland?

Lord Sutherland: I have no doubt that the effective drawing in of investment from outside has increased the number of institutions in Scotland. If there was not that additional flow of cash we could not afford to have roughly 20 institutions. That is one side of the contract and the balance. The other side is for us to be constantly vigilant and active in our own local community and ensure that, as a sector, we are providing opportunities across the board in all areas. As has been stressed, that is, in part, about the need to help to create demand and the will to go forward—for many of us that is the most pressing problem.

David Caldwell: This is an area in which there is no conflict. As Lord Sutherland was implying, the fact that we draw in money from other sources enables the higher education sector better to provide courses of education for the people of Scotland. The committee should be aware of the important transparency review that is being conducted at the moment. As the committee knows, we are keen to establish proper evidence bases. One of the interim findings of the transparency review is that the ostensibly publicly funded work of the higher education sector in the provision of programmes of education and the undertaking of research is subsidised by the income that is drawn from other sources. Not only is there not a conflict, the fact that institutions draw on funds from non-public sources is of benefit to the people of Scotland.

Professor Stevely: Around 8 per cent of the students in my institution are from outwith the

European Union. Quite apart from any financial benefit, I believe that they add greatly to the culture of the north-east and it is of tremendous benefit to our students that they are able to mix with folk from around the world. You cannot place a figure on that. Furthermore, the number of foreign students concerned is not high enough to make me worried that we are providing them with education at the expense of the people of Scotland.

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): I want to deal with the issues of stimulating demand and of bringing in people from non-traditional sectors such as lower-income families. Professor Stevely referred to the initiative between the universities in Aberdeen and Aberdeen City Council. I am sure that other areas conduct similar initiatives. Representatives of the school that is in the heart of that initiative, Northfield Academy, were in Edinburgh yesterday as part of a delegation from Aberdeen that met the Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs to discuss some initiatives that they want to be taken up that would encourage people who have not traditionally gone into further and higher education to do so and to build bridges between education and industry or employers.

Is the education system, which is split into sectors, organised in a way that facilitates the building of joint initiatives and the breaking down of traditional barriers between education and work? Will careers Scotland be able to do anything in that regard?

Professor Stevely: The problem is best dealt with locally, as circumstances vary around the country. We have been building up a forum to deal with wider access that involves as many of the local players as possible. That is the best way to deal with this matter as it would be impossible to have a centralised system to bring everyone together.

In my area, we have tried to foster the appropriate links with industry and the further education institutions and, as you say, we will have to work closely with careers Scotland on the education business partnership. Scottish Enterprise is doing good work on the opening up of access and is meeting with success in encouraging members of families that have traditionally not had much experience of continuing at school to become interested in further education as a stepping stone to more formal learning.

The ability to pool cash from all the various sectors—we are all able to make money available for that—will help us to do what you suggest.

11:00

Elaine Thomson: Thanks. Let us move on to one of the other areas that I take an interest in, which is skill shortages—specifically skill shortages in technology and engineering in the local oil and gas industry.

You said earlier that there is not a shortage of engineering graduates, but a shortage of engineering graduates who want to work in engineering. Do employers, specific industries or sectors need to look harder at how attractive they are to people when they leave university? I spoke recently to some students from the University of St Andrews and the University of Edinburgh, who were sure that engineering was a vocational degree, although medicine and law were not vocational degrees. There is clearly a status and perception issue.

Do we need to be more focused in trying to bring specific sectors and employers in, and to say more firmly to them, "These are the areas that you need to look at," and then to work with other players—whether yourselves, the enterprise agencies or whatever—to try to resolve the issue of skill shortages?

Professor Stevely: There are two issues. First, there is undoubtedly a problem in the fact that not all those who are trained as engineers work as engineers. They get very good jobs because they are attracted to them—it is not that they are disappointed at not getting a job in engineering. I am sure that some employers have difficulty in finding engineering graduates. For Scotland's future health, we need more science and engineering people to come through, and there is a long-term agenda—which starts at school level—to drive that. Something can be done through companies' investing in helping people to retrain and adapt to new careers.

Secondly, in the oil and gas industry, there is no doubt that employers must do more to prove that their industry is attractive and can provide a career for young graduates. The oil industry has been talked down a little; however, I am happy to say to any of our engineering graduates that there is a complete career in the North sea if they want it. That signal must be given firmly by the industry. Eighteen months ago, one would have wondered whether that was true. I recall a senior figure in the oil industry putting his hand on his heart and confessing, "We turned off the tap on graduates a year ago, because the oil price had gone down, and now we regret it because suddenly we are desperately running around, trying to find them again." Sometimes, people in the industry have not taken that long-term view, but they need to do so to encourage our young folk to stay in the industry.

Brian Fitzpatrick (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): Like other committee members, I was surprised by the submission from Universities Scotland, as it contains hints, suggestions and a large amount of acknowledgement of what we have achieved—and I endorse the view of Kenneth Macintosh and others that we have to recognise what we have achieved—but not many recommendations or suggestions on a number of issues that have been touched on by members of the committee.

We can all probably be quietly satisfied with what we have done with the various lads an lasses o pairts. However, they are not the hard ones. We do quite well with the working-middle class, and we have always fibbed a bit about the lads an lasses o pairts. I am here partly because I was offended by the fact that, when I turned up at the University of Glasgow, I was the only child who had come from a working-class comprehensive school. The kids who had come from the other schools were not much better than the people who were behind me; however, for lots of multifactoral reasons, those people did not get there. We are still not doing well enough by the bright, working-class children who do not get into universities. I would like to hear more about what we can do to improve that progression.

I accept that much can be achieved through introducing teaching improvements and treating teachers like the professionals they are. David Mundell mentioned that, yesterday, he and I visited several projects in and around Glasgow, which involved children who were already—at the age of 14 or 15—telling us that they had had bad experiences at school. Those children are articulate; they are manipulating technology and undertaking difficult and complex tasks. Yet those bright kids are being lost to the economy. If participation rates in the greater Glasgow area went up from around 20 per cent to 50 per cent, another 100,000 people would have equality of access and opportunity. I want to hear more suggestions on how that can be done.

I do not know and could not analyse the position of the University of Edinburgh on its articulation agreements, but we are told from other sources that there are differences in articulation agreements throughout the country. What can we do that is not being done at the moment to assist seamless progression from school to FE and HE institutions? I would welcome interaction with the committee on those issues.

Lord Sutherland: You asked a specific question about articulation agreements. The University of Edinburgh has articulation agreements and it takes students with HNDs. I can give examples if the committee wants me to spell that out.

Brian Fitzpatrick: I would like Universities Scotland, perhaps in a submission, to spell that out for each institution. That would be a helpful start.

The Convener: We need to watch the time. I hope that Lord Sutherland's answer is shorter than Brian Fitzpatrick's question.

Brian Fitzpatrick: I do not necessarily want that information today.

The Convener: I remind the representatives of Universities Scotland that they are free to supplement oral evidence with additional written evidence based on questions that they have been asked.

Lord Sutherland: That is helpful.

There are other examples of articulation agreements. All Edinburgh's higher education institutions have access programmes which, if students complete the programme satisfactorily, guarantee a place. There is no need to take highers if the year's programme is successful. That is a key model.

I was not merely hinting when I said that some money should go to schools because they should be directly involved in designing the project. The ladder exists, but the critical issue is to get people on the ladder. We talked about the perception of the great and good of universities' behaviour. We must also deal directly with the perceptions of 12 and 13-year-olds, which must be done in schools because it is too late when young people are 17. If we want to back that, we should put our money where our beliefs are. If we started a programme for head teachers, I can think of a dozen head teachers in this area who would arrogantly come up with proposals that—they thought—were better formulated than ours. They would say, "This is your answer—do this." It is not. The problem is how to get the leverage and the capacity to put extra resources behind the students whom we properly want to get through to higher education. If able students do not get through, that is nothing less than a tragedy for them and for the economy.

The Convener: It would be helpful to have additional information on that because, to be honest, it does not jump out of the submission.

Lord Sutherland: That is probably our failure. The submission contains a series of general comments on issues that are related to the committee's discussions. We wanted to elicit remarks on specific matters and we are happy to come back on them.

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): Before I come to my questions, I dissociate myself from some remarks, particularly those of David Mundell. I do not view the submission as arrogant, and to take such an attitude is indicative of the I-kent-your-faither syndrome in Scotland, whereby

people continually denigrate institutions or individuals who do well.

Universities in Scotland are doing well and we should be rightly proud of that. Professor Stevely talked about the cosmopolitan aspect in Aberdeen, which is echoed in Edinburgh. We should take on board how well the universities are doing. The representatives are here to give evidence in the lifelong learning inquiry, not to answer for sins of omission in areas that are outwith their control.

I have three questions. The first is about the lack of people going into engineering. That is a matter for the Government. If the Government wants more people to go into engineering, should not it waive fees—whether we call them tuition fees or graduate endowment fees—for two or three years for people who go into that sector? Is not that one method of trying to encourage engineers to go into engineering as opposed to financial institutions?

Lord Sutherland: That method has been attempted and is being developed further in inner London for some areas of school teaching. The intention is that people receive enhanced support on the basis that they stay in the sector for three years. We might be able to develop similar schemes in shortage areas. That is a possible way to solve the problem.

Mr MacAskill: My second question is about portability, which was touched on by Kenny Macintosh and others.

Edinburgh University has an agreement with Stevenson College, for example, which ensures that people can progress up the ladder, but the evidence that we have taken seems to show that there is a national problem. For example, someone who studied at Stevenson College might relocate to Dundee for family or business reasons, and such an agreement might not apply at Dundee University. Can some powers of enforcement or arbitration be given to a body to ensure that a stumbling block does not exist, or would that impinge on academic freedom? What system could be created to ensure that people did not have to rely on local agreements and that a national agreement for course portability was reached?

Professor Stevely: A national agreement on portability exists. The number of SCOTCAT points is portable. An articulation agreement means that someone who completes a course in mechanical engineering at an FE college can transfer to a mechanical engineering course at, say, my institution. If we have an articulation agreement, that process is straightforward and smooth. However, if the student decides to move to Dundee, it might be more difficult to give that student full credit for their course, because the composition of Dundee University's mechanical engineering degree course might be slightly different from the course at my institution, so there might be gaps in the first two years of that student's HND.

If a student has 120 SCOTCAT points, those points are guaranteed. There is no need to enforce recognition of them. However, there might be gaps in the course that the student took, which might affect how easy it is to transfer. Some courses are easier to match up than others. Sometimes, a student can do extra work to catch up, but sometimes that is impossible and they might have to slip back a year.

David Caldwell: The fact that not all mechanical engineering courses are the same is good, because it means that there is choice and diversity. It is good that such choice is available to Scottish students.

Portability will be greatly facilitated by the development of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework, because there will be a much clearer currency in level and in SCOTCAT points, which will facilitate transfers.

Mr MacAskill: Finally, the National Union of Students talked about youngsters who are undergraduates and who leave at the end of the first or second year of their degree. You admitted that pressures on students are greater than before. If someone left at the end of the first or second year for financial, domestic or other reasons and they had worked hard, it would be a shame if they had to go all the way down the snake before they could go back up the ladder. Is there merit in issuing a certificate or diploma, as the NUS suggested, to recognise that work, or can SCOTCAT points or another method do that? If the student spent their first year playing pool in the union, they would receive no points, but if they studied and passed their exams, but for financial or other reasons could not continue their course, they could have points for that.

Professor Stevely: We guarantee that such students receive SCOTCAT points that they can transfer. Most universities have certificates for first year and diplomas for second year that would allow someone to go out with a certificate rather than just to have SCOTCAT points. That system is in place. As David Caldwell said, the qualifications framework will help to harden that system and make what I said even more widely true than at present. The point is well made and we are addressing it.

The Convener: Elaine Thomson has a tight, sharp and short point to make.

Elaine Thomson: Kenny MacAskill talked about how people can be encouraged to study science, technology and engineering, which has been identified as a problem. Some previous witnesses

felt that we would benefit from a clearly focused initiative in primary and secondary schools, which would push for science, technology and engineering. Would you support that?

Professor Stevely: Yes. Very much so.

Lord Sutherland: Yes.

11:15

The Convener: I will ask a couple of questions on skills shortages. I accept your point that it is certainly not all the fault of universities, but you have made two points that are open to argument. The first is on low pay being a major contributory factor. I do not deny the problem of low pay in Scotland, but a survey two months ago demonstrated that the starting salaries for graduates in Scotland—on average about £19,000—are the highest in the UK. That suggests that, by and large, low pay is not the main problem.

The feedback that I have had from industry leaders, especially those in the information technology and electronics sector—and I am talking about people who are worldwide vice-presidents, who are aware of the situation—is that Scotland produces a significant number of IT graduates, but what they are graduating in is of no use to the industry. For example, one of the key factors today in IT is linguistic ability, yet until recently few IT graduate courses incorporated linguistic skills. I use that specific example to illustrate a general point. We might be producing the numbers of graduates, but the content of the degree course might be the problem.

Lord Sutherland: On the first point, it might be that the average starting salary of £19,000 is part of the problem. If that is across the whole range of graduates, people will be sucked into the finance sector—if that is where that level of salary is being paid—and also graduates who have done engineering have very good IT and numerical skills. The starting salary in a specific sector might be an issue. That is not the end of the discussion.

The Convener: I am saying that, based on your analysis, you cannot come to the conclusion that low pay is the problem.

Lord Sutherland: It is not the sole issue, but it is probably a motivator. It would be a good one to start with.

Professor Stevely: If someone says, "Come and work as an engineer in my company for £14,000," and someone else says, "Come to my company: we will train you as an accountant and start you at £19,000," there will be no contest.

I will address IT and languages. It is an interesting issue. I previously worked at Paisley, where the university was heavily involved in working with IBM on setting up a call centre. Encouraging our graduates to add languages to their competencies was a real issue. The problem was not their IT skills when they left; it was the fact that Scottish students are not always keen to take languages on board. That is a general issue. If we could find ways to encourage more students to take languages on board, we would be delighted. That is a specific point which we would be happy to address.

David Caldwell: May I be allowed an addendum, because it was my quotation about low pay in the *Sunday Herald* that probably prompted the convener's question?

The Convener: Can you believe it? Blame the media.

David Caldwell: I would not have chosen the headline, but that is the sub-editor's job, not mine.

It is right to say that low pay of itself is not the issue. It is important at the same time to remind the committee that we have produced hard evidence that shows that there is not an absolute shortage of engineering graduates in Scotland. The evidence for that is that only about half of them go into engineering jobs. It might not be a low pay issue; it is a relative pay issue. Those graduates find it more attractive to go into other occupations.

The Convener: It would be helpful if you could address that issue, as well as the others that we have touched on, in your supplementary submission. As you know, the committee is keen on having an evidence base, so the more evidence that you can give us, the better.

Lord Sutherland: We appreciate that.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That was a useful evidence-taking session.

We will take a comfort break before Lindsay Paterson gives evidence.

11:19

Meeting adjourned.

11:26

On resuming—

The Convener: We have only one respondent for the next piece of evidence, but I think that Professor Lindsay Paterson will be well known to members of the committee. However, he has not appeared before the committee since I took over as convener, so I welcome him for the first time. Professor Paterson has circulated what I regard as an excellent paper.

Professor Lindsay Paterson: First of all, let me

say that I am speaking as an individual—as a citizen of Scotland—and not as a representative of the institution that employs me.

The Convener: I think that we had picked that up from previous comments. [*Laughter.*]

Professor Paterson: The main purpose of my paper is to raise questions. I have not come here with any kind of blueprint; I am happy for people to say that certain questions imply answers that are ridiculous—that would be fine. The purpose of the paper is to try to raise some bigger questions. In my introductory remarks, I will refer to two questions—one is quite specific and one is much more general.

The specific question is this: in Scotland today, is it possible to expand higher education further—and, in particular, to expand it by widening access—without unification of institutional types? By unification I mean unification of the governing structures, so that we have a common structure of institutions catering at least for what we currently call FE and HE; unification of course types, so that we have a continuum of post-school courses—not just higher education courses, but courses in all the things that people do as adults; and, indeed, unification of the ways in which our higher, further and other post-school educational institutions are accountable to the Scottish public.

All the historical evidence from Scotland and other countries indicates that, when we have different institutional types and differently classified courses, we inevitably end up with differences in social and educational prestige in the different institutions and the different kinds of courses. In the past 100 years, we have tried time and again in Scotland to give parity of esteem to vocational and academic courses in schools. We tried to do that first in different kinds of secondary schools; that did not work and we had comprehensive schools. Then, before the advent of higher still, we tried to do it in the courses that were offered at the post-16 stage of secondary school; by and large, that did not work either. There have been problems with the Scottish Qualifications Authority, but nobody really doubted the ultimate desirability of unifying the vocational and academic qualifications under the framework of higher still. My question is whether it would be possible to achieve parity of esteem for various post-school institutions without unifying the institutions that provide that esteem and without unifying the course types—or qualification levels—through which people progress.

That is my first set of questions. There might be an answer other than the one that I have proposed. However, if it was possible to provide parity of esteem without unification of types, that would make Scotland unique internationally and would be a unique point in Scottish history.

11:30

The second set of introductory comments that I will make is about wider issues. They concern a debate about why we have post-school education, in particular, higher education. That debate has not been taking place. We have drifted into something like a 49 per cent participation rate for higher education. We have drifted into the provision of skills qualifications largely through people reacting over the past 20 years to various perceived failures in skills programmes for young people. At no point has our society sat down and asked why we expect adults to continue to engage in education over their lifespan—or certainly up to the age of 25 or 30. Why do we now judge that a school education is not an adequate education even though it might be a perfectly adequate basis for fulfilling roles in society such as that of a citizen or an employee?

When I say that we have not had that debate, I do not mean that lots of people have not been thinking about that subject. Teachers in schools and all other sectors have thought about what education is for. They have to think about it every time they teach a student. However, we have not had a concerted debate about it.

There are four aspects to the purpose of education. There is an economic aspect. There is no doubt that a society with a well-educated work force is more attractive to international investors. That is clearly of crucial importance. At no point would I want to deny that that is the case. However, I argue that that is not the only purpose of expanding lifelong learning opportunities. There are at least three others.

The second aspect is opportunity. Debates about equality of opportunity—social justice, in other words—used to relate to post-16 school education. Now that high percentages—about 80 per cent—of pupils stay on at school beyond 16, the really crucial questions relate to what people do voluntarily after that. If we want a just society in Scotland, we cannot avoid the social justice questions that relate to higher education. For that reason above all, unification is crucial. We cannot provide equality of opportunity—true social justice—in higher education unless all our institutions and course types are treated as of equal social and educational worth.

The third and fourth aspects to the purpose of education are in many ways different. The third has to do with democracy. Whatever else higher education and other types of post-school education—including adult education or community education—may do, they have the potential to create critical citizens. That is what the enterprise of democratic renewal and constitutional change in Scotland is about. We are trying to encourage the citizens of Scotland to

engage in democratic debate. They cannot do that unless they are equipped with the critical skills, the knowledge of how to get information and, frankly, the self-confidence to take on MSPs and to question people such as me who have the title professor in front of their name. We have a real problem in Scotland with people not being willing to engage critically in the democratic process. That means not just voting, but asking difficult questions on a sound evidential basis about where society is going. Lifelong learning can encourage that. We have lots of examples of good practice, but some of the best practice is in adult education, not in any of our formal institutions.

My last point is about culture, which relates to the point about democracy. One of the functions of the universities in Scotland is to provide a forum in which Scottish culture in its widest sense is debated and in which it is brought into contact with cultures from other parts of the world to prevent any inward-looking tendency. That debate tends to be monopolised by those who work in universities. Part of our employment conditions is to write and think and to speak at forums such as this committee. It worries me that we are trying to create a democratic culture in Scotland in which some of the terms of the debate about culture and about how our culture is exposed to other cultures are in the hands of a small number of people. If we could disperse the debate about culture, how we understand Scottish culture and how the incoming cultures relate to Scotland, perhaps we would have a more culturally democratic as well as a more politically democratic place.

The Convener: I remind members that we are now running slightly behind time so questions and, ideally, answers must be sharp and to the point. I am sure that they will be.

On that point, I will start by asking three questions. First, when I was a student—I must say that the University of Edinburgh was founded at the time—the policy of the NUS was to create polyversities. The University of Edinburgh would have been a polyversity with one management structure, on four or five campuses and including higher education, further education and art colleges. Are you hinting at the idea of a local polyversity?

If we go as far as unifying the university and college sectors, what will be the implications for academic excellence? I think there might be a concern that everything might be reduced to what is alleged to be the lowest common denominator. I am playing devil's advocate here.

My third question picks up on Lord Sutherland's points about inward investment. People contribute to the University of Edinburgh, to the University of St Andrews and to the University of Aberdeen because of what they are. Would Prince William come to St Andrews polyversity?

Professor Paterson: I will not answer the last question.

I will go through the questions. With appropriate changes for the passage of time since you were an undergraduate, convener, I remember the same policy—

The Convener: You said that professors should not be too cheeky to MSPs.

Professor Paterson: The answer to the first question is yes. There have been important changes and some of the reasons why polyversities were advocated in the 1960s would have to be different now. There might now be much more emphasis on economic function than there would have been at that time, but that idea would be the answer. I do not know exactly how articulation between the various different elements would be worked out in practice; that must be considered.

I will answer the third question now, because I believe that the second question is the most difficult. The University of Edinburgh now is not what the University of Edinburgh was 100 years ago. The university acquired lots of bits and pieces including, for example, the place where I work—Moray House institute of education, which just three ago was an independent college of education. That has not detracted from the international lustre of the university. People around the world still know the name.

There is a question about how we tell people elsewhere in the world that it is as worth investing in the other three higher education institutions in Edinburgh as it is to invest in the University of Edinburgh. I do not see a specific threat to matters such as those that were referred to earlier: the attractiveness to an international audience, to investors or to students of a place called Edinburgh, Glasgow or St Andrews university.

The second question was about excellence. That must be taken absolutely seriously. It is crucial that in any democratisation of access to higher education, excellence continues to be available within the system. Several things can be said about that. One is that there is already much experience of how to do that. We have already widened access. We have moved from 18 per cent participation in higher education 20 years ago to the point at which nearly half our young people enter higher education.

Nobody seriously questions the fact that excellence, whether in the form of first-class honours degrees or good quality research by postgraduate students or staff, can still be brought to fruition through the system. The evidence of that exists in the various league tables and other

methods of quality assessment that compare Scottish universities with universities in the United Kingdom on a common basis. Despite there being 49 per cent participation in higher education in Scotland while in England there is 33 per cent participation, the quality of graduates in Scotland seems to be pretty high. It is possible to foster excellence within a system of mass participation.

The strongest evidence of that is in the US system, which has the highest participation rate in the world, depending on what one includes in a definition of higher education. If we include what we would probably call FE, the participation rate is about 75 to 80 per cent; excluding FE, it is about 55 to 60 per cent. However, the US continues to produce some of the most distinguished scientists, technologists, social scientists and humanities scholars in the world. It is possible to have excellence embodied in a system of mass access. That is an important matter that we must not lose sight of.

Miss Goldie: If I may say so, when I came to Professor Paterson's submission, I felt as if I had got out of a tepid bath and was skinny-dipping in the Arctic ocean—it had the same invigorating effect.

Paragraph 3 of your paper asks:

"Is it sensible to have so many independent FECs?"

You do not pose the question, "Is it sensible to have so many higher education institutions?" How would you respond to that question?

Professor Paterson: It was not my intention to exclude that question, which also arises. One of the ways in which we might organise higher education in Scotland is around what might be called city poles, although such poles would not be only in the cities, because the north and south of Scotland are also emerging as possible poles. There are at least two higher education institutions in all the cities. Any kind of federated arrangement in the Lothians, for example, would have to include the four higher education institutions as well as the range of further education colleges in that area. The same would apply elsewhere. I did not mean to imply that the question would not apply to higher education institutions as well: it would.

Miss Goldie: Lord Sutherland said in response to Mr Macintosh that he had no objection in principle to changes in governance arrangements, as long as those changes were not constricting. Do you have an opinion on that?

Professor Paterson: That is one of the questions that society has not properly addressed or answered although, encouragingly, this inquiry is beginning to do that. Why on earth are higher education institutions—universities—given ultimate scope and freedom to do what they decide is in their best interests when all our other educational institutions are subject to much closer democratic scrutiny? It could be that universities are getting it right and that all the schools, FE colleges and adult education colleges are getting it wrong, and that society has got it wrong as well. However, we should at least examine carefully a privilege that is enjoyed by fewer than 20 educational institutions in Scotland and which is not shared by about 3,000 or 4,000 other educational institutions. I wonder whether, historically—

Miss Goldie: I apologise for interrupting. Why should that be examined? Is it because you think that it is wrong and that improvements can be effected?

Professor Paterson: One of the questions that was raised by the setting up of the Scottish Parliament was about the way in which certain big, powerful institutions in Scotland could be made more responsive to Scottish society. Among those big, powerful institutions are some of the older universities. Historically, people have felt that those institutions have not been sufficiently responsive to Scottish society and that they are not sufficiently democratically accountable to the political process in Scotland, in contrast to schools and other educational institutions.

Miss Goldie: That might be a laudable intent, but what would it improve?

Professor Paterson: It would ultimately improve the democratic debate about what universities are for. Making universities more accountable to the political process will not necessarily mean that an extra three dozen engineering graduates or an extra 1 per cent participation will be achieved, but it would ultimately bring the universities into closer contact with Scottish civil society. It would force them to engage in more detailed debate on the direction in which Scotland is going and on the ways in which the universities can serve Scotland. I emphasise the fact that one of the ways in which they serve Scotland is through having good international links. That is not a parochial point—it might include the ways in which international universities bring international ideas into the service of the local society. That is a long-term programme that cannot be measured overnight.

Miss Goldie: Paragraph 7 of your submission talks about the possibility of a minimum core curriculum. If that is envisaged, why not have such a core curriculum in schools?

Professor Paterson: We do, more or less. The kinds of expectations that we have of the five to 14 curriculum, the expectations of breadth and balance at standard grade level and the core skills that are embodied in the higher still programme

are the kinds of things that I am thinking about. In other words, I am talking not about particular courses or even levels of performance, but about certain kinds of curricular experience, such as awareness of the current major social and policy debates and the implications of science and technology.

Miss Goldie: Do you therefore concede that a current difficulty with our education system is that higher education institutions and perhaps further education colleges must deploy resources to residual and remedial teaching?

11:45

Professor Paterson: No, there is no such implication; we need to raise understanding to the level that we would expect of a graduate. In fact, students at school level are exposed to the wider debates that I have mentioned through largely school-level courses, although some aspects might be taught at sixth year. I am talking about the kind of understanding of social or technological issues that you would expect of someone who has the label "graduate".

Mr MacAskill: That is a somewhat radical departure from what the committee has been considering. Are there any international comparators? Although you mentioned the United States, I would be more interested if you could advise the committee about the situation in Scandinavia. In societies that are closer to Scotland in terms of homogeneity, size and so on, what is the extent of Government or quango involvement and how much interaction is there between various sectors? Given that even the minister is now a Finnophile, what is the situation in that country and should we take it into account?

Professor Paterson: The Scandinavian country with which I am most familiar in that respect is Sweden, which developed such a system about 25 to 30 years ago. In that system, regional planning forums, which are in essence what we would call local government forums, must engage periodically in a planning debate about the purposes of post-school learning. That debate must involve universities, colleges and other institutions in the locality. Over the two or three decades since the process was introduced, the universities have found it a very congenial and constructive way of engaging locally with the post-school education system. That reform of governance, which allowed regional discussion of the allocation of public money, followed the introduction of comprehensive secondary schooling in Sweden in the late 1960s—about the same time as in Scotland—and the feeling that its introduction raised fundamental questions about how the different institutions of post-school learning could relate to each other.

Mr MacAskill: Because they seek to bring in far more people from south of the border, the European Union or further away, universities in this country certainly form part of the economic sector. However, I do not think that Prince William ever considered going to Uppsala University or wherever, and universities in Sweden and Finland do not seek to educate people from the US to the same extent that we do. Does that change matters?

Professor Paterson: The various Scandinavian higher education systems educate considerable numbers of students from outside their countries, but for understandable reasons, those students tend to come from other Scandinavian countries, which is equivalent to the situation between Scotland and England. Even if Scotland were independent, most non-Scottish students would still come from south of the border because of cultural affinity and so on. I do not think that that issue affects the matter.

The Convener: Did you say "if" or "when" Scotland is independent? [*Laughter.*]

Tavish Scott: Professor Paterson, there are two certainties in this committee. The first is that Annabel Goldie will produce a lurid metaphor and the second is that Kenny MacAskill will mention Scandinavia. Following Annabel to some extent—not her metaphors—I want to ask about your interesting comments on principles of governance. I presume that you would extend your argument into current funding arrangements and mechanisms. Given that those mechanisms are currently controlled by what is, in effect, a quango, how should that system evolve?

Professor Paterson: I would extend my argument as you suggest. One possible model is a single university of Scotland that has dozens of campuses. There are perfectly workable models like that in some states in the USA. However, that is a minority experience in the US and evaluations tend to suggest that the model is too homogeneous. The suggestion that there should be regional federations within Scotland is a model that is generally commended in the diversity of US states—it operates, for example, in Illinois and perhaps most famously in California.

In those places, there is a body—rather like our SHEFC—that stands between the political process and the federations. In addition to a funding role, that body tends to have a planning role. It must have a constructive and detailed relationship with the governing bodies of the regional federations or, in the case of California, with the parallel federations of the different bits of the California higher education system. What we would call a funding body is expected to develop a long-term vision for higher education, for example, and not just to solve the technical matters of how to fund

teaching from year to year. The body must think about what higher education is for and it is expected to advise ministers and the democratic process about where the sector should go. In turn, ministers can instruct the body in certain matters.

My point is that the role of a buffer body should be strategic—it needs to have vision and not just to deal with the technical matter of allocating money. It must be said that, despite its official lack of planning powers, SHEFC has been planning the sector for a long time—partly because of the absence of close political scrutiny. Until the advent of the committee's inquiry, the policy for higher education in Scotland has been set, by and large, by SHEFC.

Tavish Scott: Is that buffer mechanism appropriate no matter which way the sector might evolve, or does the establishment of a Scottish Parliament mean that we need to question fundamentally the role of such a mechanism?

Professor Paterson: We need to question fundamentally the mechanism's role. On purely pragmatic grounds, international evidence suggests that a buffer body is a more efficient mechanism for allocating money and co-ordinating ideas about such matters. Politicians are busy—you have so many subjects in your remit that even carrying out an inquiry must be a difficult thing to clear space for. A SHEFC-type body, on the other hand, can concentrate its energies on such matters.

That is a pragmatic response, but there are European countries in which there are no such buffer bodies. France is probably the most famous big example, but that is the case in other smaller countries. If we create more powerful regional federations of institutions, we might decide after several years that the national level is redundant and that the ministry and the Education, Culture and Sport Committee can relate directly to those regional federations.

Mr Macintosh: I will try to be concise. You mentioned international examples. Although I am not especially familiar with the situation in Germany, I believe that there is a long-standing tradition in that country of separating technical and academic education, which has worked effectively without the social stereotyping that we get here.

On a more theoretical level, do you accept that there is a difference between elite institutions that get the most out of their students and privileged or exclusive institutions? Although in our country privileged institutions quite often end up being elite institutions, privileged and elite institutions are not the same and could be separated. Different HE and FE institutions have different roles. If you were to impose one structure, how would that help such institutions to deliver their roles?

Lord Sutherland said that if Edinburgh University tried to attract more part-time students, that would take students from Napier University rather than creating a bigger market. It would, in effect, take away another institution's role. Is it therefore a good idea for one institution to deliver all those different functions?

Your paper is very radical. The Universities Scotland paper said that we should build on what has already been achieved. Do you accept that good work has been done and that too radical a change would be very disruptive to all concerned?

Professor Paterson: I will deal with the last question first. There have been tremendous successes in Scottish higher education. It is a signal achievement to reach a participation level of 49 per cent, especially when Scottish universities seem to be doing very well on all the quality measurements. What further education colleges have done to widen access is remarkable. Many universities have not learned properly from that, although some have through the thorough articulation arrangements that they have. There is a great deal of success on which to build. Another thing that comes to mind is the contribution that Scotland's universities have made to the debate about Scotland's future over the past 20 years. However, that might just be a hobby-horse of mine.

What I say in my submission might be radical. I am asking questions that cannot be answered in this inquiry or in the next few years. They are the sort of questions that we as a society will face over the next two decades in relation to post-school learning. What looks radical now might not look very radical in a decade. In the 1930s, people who suggested a common secondary school looked very radical. In the 1930s even the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci said that a common secondary school could not be introduced immediately. However, the notion of a common or comprehensive secondary school had by the 1960s become part of mainstream debate in many European countries. In Scotland there is now a consensus in favour of comprehensive secondary education, certainly across most of the political spectrum. What looks radical to one generation could end up being the common sense of the next one.

As Ken Macintosh said, Germany has separate vocational and academic education. However, I am not convinced that the vocational and academic streams in German education are of equal status. There is evidence that the academic stream in Germany, as in all other countries, has higher social prestige than the vocational one. Germany—along with Austria and some other German-speaking areas that have a similar structure—is extremely unusual in Europe in

having a divided secondary system. That system has arisen for a number of historical reasons—partly because of the different attitude of employers to the provision of vocational education—and has not been followed by most other parts of Europe or by North America. Although Germany is an interesting example, it does not offer a very clear pointer as to what we should do.

Ken Macintosh's second point concerned the distinction between "elite" and "privileged". I agree completely with what he said. I hope that the word elite can be used in a fairly neutral sense that does not imply elitism. This is about producing the kind of excellence that the convener mentioned a minute ago. We need to try to create a set of structures that allows excellence and that allows intellectual, vocational and other elites to emerge in a way that does not involve privilege. At the moment privilege is undoubtedly still a factor in the creation of elites, although a less important one than it was 50 years ago.

I want to deal with the specific point that was made about part-time students. Earlier this morning it was said that if the University of Edinburgh started to offer more part-time undergraduate programmes, that would take students away from neighbouring institutions. I have two points to make in response to that. First, if in the city of Edinburgh we had a proper planning arrangement for higher education, we could decide what was the best place in which to locate each programme of study. A programme could be located in several different places and run differently in each.

Secondly, many of the courses that people want to take in Edinburgh are offered only by the University of Edinburgh. People cannot train to be schoolteachers anywhere in Edinburgh other than at the University of Edinburgh. That means that in Edinburgh there is no opportunity for people to train part time as schoolteachers. At a recent meeting, the registrar of the General Teaching Council for Scotland made that point in relation to people living in Shetland and Orkney. If institutions that provide teacher education do not, by and large, do so part time, what is the adult returner to primary teacher training who is still looking after a young family and lives in Orkney or Shetland to do? Such people cannot access full-time programmes. It is, for the two reasons that I have given, disingenuous to suggest that all types of part-time provision would bring the University of Edinburgh into conflict with other institutions.

The Convener: Three members have indicated that they have questions to ask Lindsay Paterson. I need to ensure that the representatives of the Association of Scottish Colleges have enough time to give their evidence, so I ask the members to ask one question each and I ask Lindsay Paterson to answer those. If members have additional questions, the clerk will pass them to Lindsay for a written reply. I must ensure that the witnesses from the Association of Scottish Colleges get their fair share of the time that is available.

Mr Duncan Hamilton (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I want to go back to the question of uniformity and the extremely radical suggestion that you have made, with which I do not necessarily agree. You make a connection between parity of prestige and widening access. I challenge that causal connection—I do not see any evidence for it.

12:00

There are three parts to my question. You are doing great, radical thinking, but what is the problem that your submission tries to address? The submission raises many questions, but I am not clear about its central thesis. On the causal connection between parity of esteem and increased access, why do you think there is such a connection? The evidence that we have heard, and expect to hear, suggests quite the opposite—that diversity encourages greater access, particularly in meeting local needs. Centralised provision becomes alienated from the people it tries to include. That is contrary to your point.

The United States was a good example. You made the point that mass access does not mean that there cannot be high degrees of excellence. I agree, but is not it also true that the US has perhaps the most divided and stratified academic community in the world?

David Mundell: Perhaps Professor Paterson could send a note to Simon Watkins outlining his thoughts on the Crichton campus in Dumfries.

The submission is very radical and I agree with some of it, particularly the suggestion that we should require institutions to produce people who have IT skills. However, you seem to be confirming the traditional division between school and further and higher education. Much of the evidence that we have picked up, particularly on visits, shows not only that people fail in the school environment, but that their experience was so awful that it turns them off learning for a long time. Given that, are the divisions between the sectors appropriate?

Our discussion has concentrated on further and higher education, but our inquiry has made it clear that Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and all are involved in lifelong learning. How are the other streams to be incorporated?

Brian Fitzpatrick: I welcome paragraph 9 of the submission, which urges us to have a wider vision.

We must reflect on the fact that students are not just resources for the economy. I want to ask about the links between that paragraph and the suggestions that are made in paragraphs 2 and 3 about unification. I am not convinced that that is such a radical idea. I would welcome a university of Scotland at Kirkintilloch or wherever, but what would be the links and benefits? Would we absorb the same people under one umbrella? Would there be a different dynamic? Do benefits flow from such internalisation of the way in which people are educated and the reasons why they are educated? Given our responsibilities for public stewardship, should we demand something different from the sector?

Professor Paterson: Let me deal with the final question first, because it introduces all the other answers. Internal articulation is always easier than articulation between independent institutions. Internal articulation makes it easier to move people from one course to another and to give them access to a range of staff. It would also be relatively easy to give access to library facilities and other kinds of historically rich facilities that the old universities have been able—because they have been around since before Alex Neil went to university—to build up. At the moment, those resources are not easy to access; indeed, they perhaps alienate people from certain parts of Edinburgh and other cities. That has to do with the fact that, when there are institutional and definitional differences between different kinds of educational experiences, it is much more difficult for people to cross from one to the other than when those experiences are all within the same broad framework and the same institution. Indeed, the new Scottish credit and qualifications framework is part of an attempt to recognise that.

I admire Crichton campus enormously. It is exactly the kind of example, along with the university of the Highlands and Islands—when it gets going properly—that I am talking about. Crichton exhibits co-operation between old university, new university, FE college and adult learning provision.

That relates to Duncan Hamilton's first point. There is a link between the lack of parity of esteem among the institutions and wider access. Why is it that only 11 per cent of the University of Edinburgh's entrants are from manual social classes whereas, at the other extreme in Scotland, nearly 40 per cent of the entrants to the University of Paisley and the University of Abertay Dundee are from that social class? Those figures can be adjusted for the kinds of qualifications that the different institutions require, but even if that is done—the adjusted benchmarks are produced by SHEFC—the figure for the University of Paisley and the University of Abertay Dundee is about a third of entrants and the figure for the University of Edinburgh is about 18 per cent, which means that Edinburgh is below its benchmark.

Why is it that the University of Edinburgh attracts fewer applications from people from manual social classes? I do not think that the selection process in the University of Edinburgh is not meritocratic—it is fair, because it is based on people's qualifications—so why is it that people are not coming forward with the necessary qualifications to get in, even though they come forward to establishments such as the University of Abertay Dundee and the University of Paisley? I should add that the figures I quoted are from SHEFC's performance indicators. The situation has something to do with the ways in which different places are perceived. Places such as the University of Edinburgh are perhaps perceived as alien to people from a certain kind of social background in a way that the University of Paisley and the University of Abertay Dundee are not seen as alien and off-putting.

I am also sure that, as a result of the social class mix of certain institutions, the perception of the institution is, "It's not for the likes of us." We have quite a lot of good qualitative research evidence that that perception exists in certain parts of Scotland. That is compounded by the fact that, even when an adult with a bit more self-confidence wants to do a part-time distance learning course, it turns out that the institutions that they felt they would not want to enter as a young person are the ones that do not offer part-time lifelong learning courses for them to take part in. That means that that person ends up back with the kinds of places that they might have started in when they were aged 18. There is an intimate link.

The point has been stated frequently this morning that the issue is all about demand, not supply. I dissent from that for two reasons. The first is that, historically, when Governments have said that more higher education places will be made available, people have come forward in adequate numbers to fill them. We can track that right through the 1980s. As the then Government increased and reduced the number of available places, applications rose or fell in accordance.

Secondly, when up-front tuition fees were abolished last year in Scotland, as you no doubt know, applications from Scotland-domiciled students to Scottish institutions rose by 3.8 per cent, whereas for all other categories of student across the UK applications either fell or rose by at most 0.9 per cent. That was not as a result of a change in the quality of the young people of Scotland; it was not suddenly the case that Scotland had an extra 3.8 per cent of good people, whereas the rest of the UK did not. The difference was because of the announcement that Scottish higher education would welcome more people; the

announcement of the abolition of up-front tuition fees was, in effect, a statement that applications were welcome.

In other words, people respond to the invitation to take up opportunities. I do not think that educational providers can get off the hook by saying that the issue is all about demand. By announcing that we welcome certain categories of people, especially those categories of people who do not have high rates of participation at the moment, we encourage such people to apply and encourage some of those social disparities to be ended.

The Convener: Thank you. There may be additional questions but, if it is okay with you, we will put them to you in writing.

Professor Paterson: Yes, of course.

The Convener: Sorry to curtail you.

David Mundell: Perhaps you would like to read the *Official Report* of this meeting and come back on some of the issues that we did not have time to cover.

The Convener: I welcome representatives of the Association of Scottish Colleges. We have spent some time on our case studies of a number of colleges. So far in the inquiry, members of the committee have been to John Wheatley College, Inverness College, Dumfries and Galloway College, Dundee College, Lauder College, Fife College of Further and Higher Education, Glenrothes College and Elmwood College. We have also had a videoconference with 10 colleges in the Highlands and Islands. I hope that Tom Kelly will accept that we have spent a lot of time with the college sector. I think that I am right in saying that we have not had a case study visit to a university. I do not know whether you will be glad to know that, but it emphasises that we recognise the extreme importance of the college sector.

Tom Kelly (Association of Scottish Colleges): We are the inclusive sector—we include universities in lifelong learning.

The Convener: Tom Kelly is chief executive of the Association of Scottish Colleges, Janet Lowe is principal of Lauder College in Fife and John Burt is principal of Angus College. Tom, do you want to make some brief introductory remarks?

Tom Kelly: I will ask my colleagues to say something briefly about their interests.

Janet Lowe (Association of Scottish Colleges): I remind the committee that, although I am a member of the board of Scottish Enterprise, I am here today representing the Association of Scottish Colleges. I am speaking only for the association.

John Burt (Association of Scottish Colleges): I am the chairman of Tayside Careers and a member of the welfare to work advisory task force. However, I am here representing the Association of Scottish Colleges principals forum today.

Tom Kelly: I hope that the committee has had a chance to absorb some of the ideas not only in the submission but in the case studies of the colleges that members have visited. Our main purpose today is to invite you to ask us questions rather than for us to repeat propositions. We are concerned that the strategy for lifelong learning should focus on four broad points. Obviously, we are talking about what lifelong learning should be in five or 10 years' time and not simply in the here and now.

One point relates to the purpose of lifelong learning—some of the earlier debate has been about that. We have tried to make the point that we have to address the key issue of student demand, not just employer requirements and society's needs. There is a need to balance all three of those in whatever strategy emerges. As has been said, student demand is a strong driver of what has happened over the past decade and we expect that to continue in the next decade.

The second point is about the FE sector. We see ourselves as being at the centre of lifelong learning, not just because of what FE does—more than 400,000 people come to colleges each year—but because of the interaction with the other sectors. We believe that FE is the lynchpin of lifelong learning; we would expect it to remain so in the new strategy.

The third point is about priorities for new investment. We are not suggesting that we would want to diminish investment in those areas where Scotland already has a good track record that it would want to maintain. Our view is that new investment in the next decade should be in basic and intermediate qualifications. That is to put right the anomaly whereby those who have attained least by the time they leave school get least support from public funds for their education thereafter. That leads into our idea of the lifetime learning account, which would bring together all the elements of record of attainment, entitlement to learning and opportunities. It would provide a much better framework within which individuals can take ownership of and interact with the wide range of agencies that will offer lifelong learning.

Finally, we believe that there is too much regulation of those who deliver lifelong learning. That is not to detract from the importance of a strategic approach to public funds and accountability by those who offer lifelong learning. We support that, but the question is how it is to be achieved. We think that streamlining and simplifying some of the supervisory arrangements would be extremely beneficial.

12:15

The Convener: I kick off by asking you two questions, Tom. For many years, one of the key issues affecting the college sector has been the way in which it is funded—the student unit of measurement method, as it is called. There is a general feeling, in the sector and among employers, that the emphasis has been on bums on seats, rather than on why those people are at college and how they could benefit from education and training in the college or elsewhere. You are making a number of suggestions for changes to the way in which colleges are funded, but I am not clear about the process by which funding would be distributed to the colleges. Could you expand on how that would work and explain your proposals in more detail?

Before we started the inquiry, I was struck by a presentation from the principal of Anniesland College, who highlighted the inverse relationship between the resources that are spent on those who get on and would get on anyway, on those who just get by and on those who do not get anywhere.

I have talked to people about individual learning accounts. The other day, I spoke to a minister who is using an individual learning account. A couple of weeks ago, I spoke to the well-paid chief of a quango who is using an individual learning account. I am concerned that we may yet again be channelling resources more towards people who are already pretty well-off. Perhaps we are not channelling resources towards the bottom half of the seventh who, as we heard in previous evidence, are still not getting on to the further and higher education ladder. College funding and how we ensure that those students who need funding get it are two crucial issues.

Tom Kelly: Let me answer your second question first. We would not have set up individual learning accounts in the way that the scheme was set up. That is not because we do not see a need for more support for part-time students, who represent one of the areas that should develop markedly over the next decade. We are looking towards entitlement to support for tuition, and the various other components that students need in order to study, to achieve a better balance. We do not want students to get maintenance and support only for full-time study in one small period immediately after leaving school. We want to look at learning across a person's lifetime.

We have two reasons for wanting that. First, people choose later to come to learning. We must therefore have the means to offer a package that reflects their situation at that later stage. Secondly, those who have had difficulty with learning and with getting jobs take zig-zag routes. We therefore have to make different judgments at different points. With one individual, there may be something to build on. With another individual, there may be very little. There has to be more flexibility in the system.

As I said, we would not have started with something like individual learning accounts. Apart from dead weight, there is another reason: the administrative cost. To be blunt, we felt that that cost was excessive. It would have been possible to offer that sort of inducement more directly at less overhead cost and with more of the available funds going to tuition.

In response to your other question, I invite my colleagues to comment on how satisfied they are with having a funding council to do the job. We value having an intermediary body that is not subject to too much political intervention. There has to be a funding formula; there has to be a fair means of distribution. The difficulty for further education is that, because it is so diverse, that formula has become increasingly artificial. It is difficult to measure full-time courses in a simple way against evening classes or against online or distance learning. That problem does not go away if we try to change the structure. What matters from the point of view of colleges is that the system is fair, predictable and stable. We are not meeting all those requirements just yet. I shall ask my colleagues to say a little more.

Janet Lowe: One of the difficulties with individual learning accounts is that they are yet another initiative in the relatively complex funding landscape for part-time students. Those who are most adept at dealing with systems, filling in forms and registering for things have perhaps been more successful in accessing the funding than have those who need more support to access what might seem an impenetrable system.

Colleges have had a lot of success in enabling people from different sectors of society to access ILAs, but we have not had the ability to manage the accounts or promote their availability. That has been done nationally. I am arguing for the association's view on lifetime learning accounts. If all funding for part-time students was channelled into a single source, the complexity would be reduced and there would be more chance of a wider cross-section of the population securing funding.

On the SUMs funding, colleges are perfectly willing to be accountable for the funds that we are given by the funding council. We agree that student activity should be measured and that there should be an output measure of what is delivered. Our concern has been that there has been too much emphasis on that approach, as I think the convener said, and there has been less emphasis on the strategic development of colleges to meet the needs of a much-expanded student

population. We do not have a strategic agreement with our funding council about how to improve quality, resources and relevance. We are restricted to a model with an overemphasis on counting activity and an underemphasis on the quality of the learning that is delivered.

John Burt: There is no doubt that the complexity of student funding has increased dramatically over the past two or three years. That mirrors the fact that there is more student funding. We have had to set up our own specialist student funding team locally to advise students on the complexities of funding. The colleges play a big role in helping people through the bureaucracy involved in accessing the funding. As the ILA system is so bureaucratic, a more middle-class group of students is coming through, rather than people from some of the groups for which the scheme was intended. The jury is out on whether the ILAs are reaching the parts that they were supposed to reach.

Funding has improved in the past two or three years, as it is more transparent and it is real time—previously, our funding in one year reflected what we did two years before. Funding should reflect local needs and take account of local circumstances. It must reflect what colleges are doing and the resources that we are putting in, but there is scope to link it more to the strategic development that the committee is examining.

Tom Kelly: The reduction in the unit of funding in our sector has been severe. That is on the back of sustained growth. The recent survey evidence from the funding councils confirms the extent to which our students regard teacher contact as crucial, much more so than is the case for students in universities. We get a much smaller unit of resource for equivalent work. Funding has been squeezed in real terms over the past five years or so. The Scottish Executive has answered our plea on that to some extent. I hope that, over the next decade, the issue will be pushed to one side because we will have realistic and sustainable levels of funding. If so, the question will become: to what better uses can that funding be put?

Miss Goldie: Section 7 of your submission addresses reconfiguration. Is there no existing duplication of resource in respect of the number of FE colleges in Scotland?

John Burt: The SFEFC study of supply and demand showed remarkably little duplication. Those of us who had come to the issue for the first time and had not been engaged at local level had expected there to be substantial evidence of duplication.

There are two reasons why there is not much duplication. First, if a college does not get the students, it does not offer the course. If a course is offered, people want to pursue that course. The second issue is relevance. Is there an overlap between provision at college A and college B for the same industry's needs? Because of the problem of the squeeze on resources, some of the provision that was tailored to industries such as construction and engineering has been difficult to maintain. That is simply because of the cost of facilities and issues about demand that members were discussing earlier.

It cannot be the case that there is no overlap or duplication across the sector. We have moved towards greater collaboration between colleges so that, where provision is expensive or demand is short, provision is concentrated where it is best delivered. That takes time to unravel and we will see the benefits only over a period of two to three years.

John Burt: One thing that comes out of thinking about merging colleges is the assumption that larger is more efficient. I can speak only from my college's point of view. Angus College is by no means the largest college in Scotland; it sits somewhere in the middle of the table. However, it is the third most efficient college in Scotland and it meets the needs of its community, which is a rural one. We have invested in outreach centres throughout the community. We are therefore diversifying the curriculum out into the community. If we did not do that, people would not have the choice or the ability to access education. There will be some indication that the same things are going on in different areas, but we are seeking to meet demand and need and to give people choice.

Janet Lowe: Colleges are conscious of being in both a local and a national market. That is how we avoid duplication. We concentrate on our local markets and are now becoming adept at forming consortia to cover Scotland, whereby groups that specialise in certain areas provide a service for Scotland. My view is that those consortia are an more effective way of developing partnerships and collaboration than is the traditional approach of merging local colleges. That traditional approach perhaps does not recognise that colleges are local and national.

Miss Goldie: Do I understand from your response to the question that there is an attachment to the concept of a single physical site provision?

Tom Kelly: Not at all. There is an attachment to community. In most cases, a Scottish FE college is the premier institution of lifelong learning in its town. All the colleges have outreach facilities. Many have more than one campus. All colleges now have learning centres located in the community and all have a variety and growing range of links with other community service

providers and businesses. Today's college retains a campus—and it wishes to do so—but it also has a wider network.

Miss Goldie: I have a question on a totally different tack: the links with business, which you mention in paragraph 6.12 of your submission. What is wrong at the moment? You are proposing that a new strategy should be devised, so what is wrong with current links with business?

Tom Kelly: The first point is simply one of time scales. When I have that debate with businessmen, they say, "We have skills shortages and we need these people today." However, I then ask them to tell me whom they will need in a year or two's time, how many of them they will need and how long they will guarantee the jobs. That is a tease because I know how difficult those questions are.

One of the problems with skills shortages is that, by the time we know that the issue is being raised, the shortage already exists. We are happy to work with the new framework that the Scottish Enterprise skills unit is proposing in order to get to grips with the issue. There are obviously some key issues, such as construction in parts of Scotland where big construction programmes are starting. There are other long-standing structural issues to be considered, such as engineering. We are happy to do that.

Janet Lowe was right to say that the problem is that colleges have to address local demand to whatever extent they are able. If that local demand does not reflect concerns about national demand, we will need other mechanisms for considering national demand. We are, however, happy to work with other sectors. I do not think that there is a problem with saying that colleges will seek to address need if a means can be found to make that need real.

The need is not real, however, if it does not translate to students. That is one of the problems. The point at which a course is sustainable is now higher than it was when colleges were more generously funded. Even some practical courses are right up to the limit that is set by health and safety requirements. Other considerations make it difficult to provide on-tap courses of the kind that some businesses would like. We seek a better partnership and will seek that at local and national level.

John Burt: There is one debate at national level and another at local level. At local level, our quality system is such that we involve employers in the design of every course we organise in the college—they tell us what should be in it. That is another strength of the community focus of colleges. There is a great deal of interplay between colleges and local employers.

I listened to the evidence from the previous witnesses. A great deal was made of skills shortages in engineering. In our area, we have set up the Angus engineering forum. We bring the practitioners in engineering to a specialist forum to debate these kinds of issue. The forum is working almost as a business exchange for the local engineering companies. Again I stress that the specific focus that colleges have on their own communities is very important.

12:30

Miss Goldie: Thank you for your undivided attention—despite the light torture when the curtains opened. [*Laughter.*]

Tavish Scott: Yes—it was unfair to make this appear like a Gestapo interrogation.

Do you think that community links make your sector more able to deal with links to schools? You may have heard the evidence from earlier witnesses, which reflected other evidence that we have heard. The committee is concerned about the sector's links with schools and about the encouragement of more young people into disciplines that, at the moment, appear not to attract them. Does being community based put you in a stronger position to establish links with schools, or are you already where you want to be?

Tom Kelly: The right to study should be at the heart of the lifetime learning account, and that should apply irrespective of whether you are in a job. We accept that the transition from school to whatever follows is most difficult for those who have achieved least at school. Colleges have a wide range of innovative programmes to try to give people some enthusiasm for learning before they leave school, spend a year hanging around on street corners, perhaps do a training or a Government-funded scheme, and then come back. We want to break out of that cycle by working with people at an earlier stage.

A point about vocational and academic qualifications arises. Emphasis on the academic means that academic qualifications lose their appeal for many youngsters when they are relatively young; the vocational has much more appeal for them. Colleges can work with schools on that, and are already doing so.

Janet Lowe: The committee has heard much about the 49 per cent of young people who go on to higher education, but it has not always been pointed out that 28 per cent do so in further education colleges. We must also consider the 51 per cent of young people who do not go on to higher education. School-college partnerships have been especially successful in providing opportunities for those young people to progress, so that they do not drop out of the system and

then come back, recycled, in future years through the new deal or remedial measures for unemployed people. If we can create mechanisms that enable those young people to progress from school into college—or into the workplace with in-college training—we can solve some of the problems that assail us later on. We can give some very good examples of school-college partnerships that are having considerable and measurable success.

Tavish Scott: It would be helpful if you could provide the committee with examples of best practice.

I want to ask about the other end of things—your links with higher education institutions and with people who progress through the system and perhaps do a further education course before jumping to university. Are you satisfied that those links are adequate? Are there areas where improvements could be made to ease a particular person's passage through the system? What is the distinctive role for your sector, as opposed to the distinctive role for the higher education institutions?

Tom Kelly: I will start by making a point about the way in which people come into higher education. There are huge advantages in the fact that further education is more local. Many people embark on a higher national course with no intention of going on to degree level and no expectation that they are capable of doing so. Jim Gallacher has done important work on that matter. People who get the opportunity of starting to study in an FE college learn that they have more capacity and more ability to succeed than they realised.

The second question is about the route across to university. A high proportion of those who complete HN awards go on to further study, which includes going from the first level—higher national certificate—to higher national diploma, but many also go on to degree level. One should not impede progress to degree level for those who want that and the FE sector does not seek to do so. It is important to say, however, that HN qualifications are valuable in their own right and are so valued by employers. Higher national qualifications are not just a passport to degree level and we should not assume that everyone can or should go on to degree level.

We heard earlier that the Scottish credit and qualifications framework stalled for a time. We need to accelerate progress on that framework to ensure that it is in place and works across the whole range. Just below the HN level is an area of great difficulty about how qualifications are valued. There are real problems about getting the sectors that own—in a sense—the Scottish vocational qualifications to accept that levelling and coming into the national framework is beneficial. All of that will take some time, but we are making progress.

It is perhaps wrong in principle that articulation agreements are essentially private, institutional agreements and not generally in the public domain. They are difficult to map across the further education sector. When someone joins a college, it makes them aware of the articulation possibilities that it has managed to negotiate, but what if that one route that has been negotiated happens to be a route that a student is not interested in? That is the difficulty. The framework is not working well enough to open up those pathways.

Tavish Scott: You are suggesting that that area needs to be opened up and that there are better, more open and transparent ways in which that can be done.

Tom Kelly: Yes.

Janet Lowe: Earlier this morning the committee was given an interesting example of a student with an HND in mechanical engineering who could go to one university under an articulation agreement, but not to another one, and might have to do a little extra study to progress. The attitude was that it is up to the student to ensure that they are able to progress and that it is not up to the institution to amend and develop its courses to make progression easier.

Higher national certificates and diplomas are national qualifications that are validated by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. The curriculum is available and well known and is fairly standard throughout many colleges. Universities run many different degrees, but colleges run HNDs that are comparable. Therefore, it is perhaps not beyond the capabilities of universities to adapt their courses to make progression easier, instead of expecting the student to reconfigure their qualifications in order to take the next step. We want a little bit more enthusiasm from higher education institutions about adapting and changing to make articulation more possible, instead of their leaving the problem with colleges and students.

Tavish Scott: That was very helpful. Thank you.

Brian Fitzpatrick: Tavish Scott has just covered my points and I am grateful to him for that. However, I will not miss the chance to ask another question.

I am pleased by your suggestion of the lifelong learning account. I want to tease out with you what you propose and how that would sit with the qualifications framework. Is it intended that the framework should give learners the language and sustain them until they get to the stage of the lifelong learning account?

Tom Kelly: Yes. The SCQF provides a much simpler way to record what use an individual has made of the available qualifications and in what ways. We want any institution to be able to appraise individuals and advise them about their entitlement to support in probably complex circumstances—for example, people in their 30s who are thinking about a career change. There must be something that makes it easier for the learner to say, "Hold on a minute. I'm not excluded from this range of lifelong learning just because I'm not a school leaver with highers." That is the key point.

Brian Fitzpatrick: If I may say so, what is proposed is a substantial innovation. At a later date, I would appreciate much more information.

Janet Lowe: We do not see the proposal as easy to achieve, but it should be possible to explore the bringing together of the different pots and sources of existing funding to support part-time learning. It should be possible to bring them into one scheme that is more easily understood and accessible. We do not have an immediate answer about how that should be done, but we are disturbed that it is not being explored. Rather than examine the existing funding to see how it might be applied more effectively, more new pots of funding are being introduced.

The Convener: At this stage, is it the concept that you want to get across?

Janet Lowe: Yes, and the need for further research into the feasibility of the concept.

John Burt: One figure sticks in my mind—83 per cent of Scots think that education and training is important. The same research shows that only 34 per cent of Scots think that education and training is for them. The proposal has been made to address that huge gap. We should remind ourselves that 80 per cent of the work force that will be in place 10 years from now is with us already. Scotland has a responsibility to address that training issue.

The Convener: Thank you. I call Kenny Macintosh. No. I apologise—

Mr Macintosh: It is the same point—

The Convener: I should have taken David Mundell first, but if Kenny Macintosh is making the same point, I suggest that he carry on.

David Mundell *indicated agreement*.

Mr Macintosh: Thank you, David. That is very gracious of you.

As I understand it, the lifetime learning account covers student funding and student support. Is that what you are proposing?

Tom Kelly: Yes. We are proposing an entitlement to tuition and to the various forms of student support, including maintenance, travel, child care and materials.

Mr Macintosh: Are there different problems in each case? We are aware that student funding and student support produce problems. Is the major problem the funding of places or is it the multiplicity and complexity of the methods of support?

Tom Kelly: It is both. Let us be clear. In abolishing up-front fees for full-time study, Scotland has pioneered the way. However, for most forms of part-time study, fees still have to be paid or students have to find another source of funding for those fees. One element of the proposal is to balance the package and entitlement between full-time and part-time study. A second element is the simplification and alignment of the various forms of maintenance support. In the main, that applies to full-time students. The various forms of allowances also need to be simplified and aligned.

At the moment, things are happening on both issues, but there is a danger that too many new initiatives are being introduced and that there is no convergence towards the long-term goal of the balanced inclusive account.

Mr Macintosh: Is one of the objectives to stimulate students to take up their entitlements? Is the proposal simply a bureaucratic simplification measure or is the aim to stimulate demand by encouraging students to realise that they have entitlements?

Janet Lowe: In our opinion, it would stimulate demand. Many students are anxious about undertaking further or higher education. They lack an understanding of how it might be funded. That is particularly the case for part-time students. Many such students are on benefit and they have a natural concern that, if they embark on education, there might be an effect on their benefit. They are not skilled at finding the information that might help them to make complicated decisions about how to balance their personal circumstances with their wish to learn.

For adult learners, learning is integrated into their lives—it is not done separately. It has to be balanced with family and financial commitments, which weigh heavily on a person's mind when they make those decisions. We have to look at the issue from the perspective of learners who might say, "That is too complicated for me. I do not understand it and I will not try it." If we can simplify the bureaucracy for the learner, there is no doubt that we can increase demand.

Mr Macintosh: Thank you.

David Mundell: I should declare that I am

technically a college student: I am embarking on a European computer driving licence at Dumfries and Galloway College. Although it might attract adverse comments, I am also signed up for an ILA.

The Convener: I hope that your computer driving is better than your ordinary driving, David.

12:45

David Mundell: I will have the licence for longer.

I want to explore the relationship with schools. When Ken Macintosh and I visited John Wheatley College, a concern, which has been evidenced elsewhere, was expressed: that further education is often seen as just mopping up for failure in school. There was clearly a group of young people who, for whatever reasons, performed better in the further education environment.

Superficially, sending youngsters to school and then into further education to do exactly what they have supposedly been doing at school seems a tremendous waste of resources. Those youngsters have not only failed at school, they have been totally put off the learning experience. How do you see the two sectors dovetailing?

Tom Kelly: One of the difficulties with the vocational approach to lifelong learning is that it can seem to be a waste of effort on everybody's part if it does not lead to employment or self-employment later. That is not entirely the case in FE colleges, because the focus in what colleges offer is about making people more ready for work. That is still the emphasis. Colleges have academic programmes that deserve to be taken seriously in academic terms, but making people ready for work is their primary function. They therefore look at and work with individuals in quite a different way from schools or universities. Consequently the experience of the student will be different.

A college may have to tell someone from school that if they want to realise their ambitions they must do something about their literacy and numeracy and that the college has programmes that can help them to do that without losing the place they want on the vocational programme.

Colleges are not age-and-stage institutions. If the programme is right for a student, they can do it at whatever point they are ready to enter it.

Janet Lowe: I do not see us as mopping up failure. I would be disappointed if we took that approach. We always offer progression and always offer people the opportunity to move on.

We were asked what our distinctive role is. I am not sure that we answered that very well; we could perhaps answer it in response to this question.

Colleges have a distinctive curriculum that is different from that of schools; it is more vocational and more practical. For certain students it is more interesting, attractive and lively.

We also have a distinctive learning environment, which is supportive and based on guidance at the core of all learning and understanding of where the students are going. We cater for a wide range of students. That distinctive learning environment, with both adults and young people, is conducive to young people taking a different attitude to themselves, their self-esteem and aspirations. We have a distinctive curriculum, a supportive environment based on guidance and a distinctive cultural and social environment, which enables young people to achieve differently than they would have in school.

Attending college is not repeating the same thing again; it is progression. We need to provide the committee with good examples of that because members are obviously interested in it.

John Burt: In particular, we should draw the committee's attention to the role that colleges play in giving youngsters vocational tasters. Many young people do not know what they want to do. They might think that they want to be in construction. They have to come in and sample being a joiner or plumber and get the tasters that will allow them to be better informed. That is the unique role that colleges can play. Each college will have distinct roles with its local schools so that it can offer those tasters.

We also offer higher courses in subjects such as psychology and philosophy, which schools cannot run because of resource constraints. We can achieve the critical mass necessary to do that. It would be useful to have some examples of the very good school links that exist in Scotland. This is not just a mopping-up exercise.

David Mundell: Could the process be dovetailed better, or is it as good as it could be?

Janet Lowe: It could be better.

Tom Kelly: Because of the funding arrangements, there have been problems. Perhaps this is the area where Lindsay Paterson's very radical approach has some merit. Schools are funded to teach people below school-leaving age and have provision in S5 and S6 for people beyond school-leaving age. We do not want every college to duplicate, willy-nilly, provision that is already available in schools. We are neither offering nor seeking such an approach; instead we want to find ways of collaborating to ensure that, between college and school, the best range of provision can be offered to the widest possible range of students.

We have heard that colleges should take the

disaffected and uncommitted from schools at an earlier age. We do not want to adopt that approach either. FE is and should remain a sector of lifelong learning that is based on the voluntary principle. We do not seek to apply the conscription principle. If, however, individuals who are very turned off by school are willing to volunteer to learn in a college, such a proposition ought to be made easier for them.

I should repeat that we are not looking to poach or conscript. We just want the door to be opened rather more to those people who have reached the point where they say, "This is what I want to do, and I can do it only at college."

Janet Lowe: An important player on the horizon in this respect is careers Scotland. Colleges may not have been quite as well served by the current careers guidance services on aspects such as presenting options to young people and helping people to choose in a way that ensures that they consider all options. We have some high hopes that, with careers Scotland, different kinds of choices might become the norm for young people. I certainly support the view that we are looking for informed choice, not conscription, and I think that the organisation will have a significant role to play.

David Mundell: I have one more small question, to which you can respond in writing if you want. What funding barriers inhibit working with other sectors? You have mentioned the funding of one element, but my understanding is that there are also barriers with higher education and other training providers that sometimes do not make working together easy. It would be most useful if you could set out those barriers.

Tom Kelly: The main core of FE business is directly funded by SFEFC and is defined in ways that set it apart from other streams of public funding. That is entirely right, because no one wants unnecessary duplication or double funding across systems. Essentially, a student learns at one particular institution and is therefore eligible for what it offers. That part should be relatively straightforward: you are at school; you are at college; then you are at university. Where an individual is getting the benefit of facilities at another institution under a collaborative arrangement, it is up to the institutions to sort things out.

However, there are areas where we cannot start from scratch. For example, FE offers a range of distinctive programmes that we do not share with others, which is also true of the other sectors. Universities would find it difficult to do what is known in our jargon as infill, in which people are slotted into on-going programmes. That can be difficult where there are very rigid curriculums and timetables. As colleges tend to have very flexible curriculums and timetables, we find infill easier to manage. If someone drops out halfway through a university course there really is no problem with their starting a college course in mid-session.

David Mundell: That is fine. I might ask for some additional information through the clerk.

The Convener: Okay. We will have a final question from Elaine Thomson.

Elaine Thomson: I want to talk about links between school and college, particularly for people younger than the school-leaving age. You are right to assume that your work relies on voluntary participation. Aberdeen College is offering pupils at Northfield Academy the opportunity to spend some time at the college doing motor mechanics and so on. Pupils are enthusiastically taking up that offer and the young people that we want to draw in to further and higher education are engaged. The knock-on effect of that is that they return to school and suddenly realise that they need to be literate, numerate and able to use a computer. That starts them on a positive cycle.

Would you support the development of that sort of initiative? How could we fund that? How could we get the right structures in place to develop the initiatives?

Tom Kelly: We have yet to see the evaluation results of the experiment with educational maintenance allowances, which are available only in some parts of Scotland. In principle, it seems a good idea that people from similar domestic circumstances who are of similar ages are treated the same whether they stay at school or go to college. However, the educational maintenance allowance is available only after school-leaving age, so it does not address the other issue that you raised.

In Scotland, the different sectors have remained relatively specialised in their own areas. We do not have sixth-form colleges and the similar hybrid institutions that have developed in some parts of England.

We do not want to be conservative about institutional matters. If there are better ways to organise, we should try to find them. We would rather that colleges were used in a comprehensive way. A good further education college is a comprehensive community college. It provides a wide range of offerings by age and by type of provision. The problems relating to schools are to do with the legal framework that applies to pupils below school-leaving age. For example, issues relating to the registration of teachers and child welfare are specific to children of school age. The answer to the problem is to have colleges work closely with schools. As I said, we are trying not to cut in on schools but to support individuals as learners and give schools the opportunity to use college facilities in more imaginative ways.

The Scottish Executive will have to examine some of the issues surrounding funding and the overlap of function. Some of them are quite technical and will need policy decisions rather than simply improvements of practice at a local level.

John Burt: I endorse the Aberdeen example. The issue relates to the community focus of colleges. The transition period should start before the fourth and fifth years. We involve pupils from second and third year in the construction industry to get them thinking about their future careers. However, the question of how that is to be funded is difficult and should be considered further.

Janet Lowe: We want to ensure that funding does not get in the way of what we are trying to do. That was perhaps the point of David Mundell's earlier question. If funding on the basis of places in colleges is over-emphasised, and what the learner is achieving and the service that colleges are providing are under-emphasised, inappropriate decisions on funding might be made. The interests of the learner rather than the funding arrangements need to be central to our thinking.

There are many good examples as well as the example of Aberdeen.

The Convener: This has been a useful session. Added to the other work that we have done, it has given us a clear idea of the college sector's views on lifelong learning. It would be extremely helpful if the witnesses could make a supplementary written submission dealing with the other issues that members raised. In discussions of this sort issues are always raised that we do not foresee. Once again, thank you for your evidence, which was very helpful.

Tom Kelly: We thank you and your colleagues for the constructive and helpful interest that you have taken in colleges. Your visits have been extremely welcome in all colleges.

Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

13:00

The Convener: Item 3 concerns the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Scotland) Bill. As instructed by the committee, I, along with the convener of the Health and Community Care Committee, attended the relevant meeting of the Parliamentary Bureau, at which it was agreed that the Health and Community Care Committee would act as the lead committee on the bill but that the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee would take evidence on it from a business point of view.

Members have before them a paper containing three recommendations. At the meeting of the Parliamentary Bureau, I made it clear that any role that we were asked to play must not interfere with our timetable for the lifelong learning inquiry. We have scheduled two evidence-taking sessions as part of stage 1 consideration of the bill. Following its meeting this morning, the Health and Community Care Committee has requested that we submit our evidence to that committee by the February recess. If we are to do that, we must hold the evidence-taking sessions on the dates that are suggested in the paper.

I suggest that we do not need to take a great deal of oral evidence on the bill. We can take written evidence from organisations that want to submit it, but we should restrict oral evidence to two one-hour sessions at most. Because the Health and Community Care Committee is the lead committee on the bill, it is responsible for setting the timetable. However, I will re-emphasise to the convener of the Health and Community Care Committee that we indicated our willingness to assist in scrutinising the bill provided that that did not threaten our lifelong learning inquiry. That is crucial.

Is what I have proposed acceptable to the committee?

Mr Macintosh: I welcome your comments. Tobacco advertising is a very important issue, about which all members will be concerned. However, I have concerns about the bill and am alarmed by the suggestion that that we should consider it in January. That is totally impractical. I cannot understand how we could consider the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Scotland) Bill at the same time as we consider our draft report on lifelong learning. I welcome the convener's suggestion that consideration of the bill be put back slightly.

I would like to reserve my position on what will happen in February and to make a judgment when the time comes. I do not want to divert the committee's attention away from the important work that we are doing, even for the sake of a subject that is important, when there are other political considerations that need to be taken into account.

Bill Butler: I welcome your comments, convener, and echo what Ken Macintosh said. I would like to wait and see how matters develop. We should take evidence on the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Scotland) Bill, time permitting, but the lifelong learning inquiry is the main business of the committee and it must not be hampered in any way. I may have misread it, but the proposed meeting schedule appears to include three evidence-taking sessions—on 23 January, 6 February and 13 February. I welcome the proposal to modify that. Today we could decide in principle to accept that proposal, subject to review by the gang of five.

The Convener: Group of five, rather than gang.

Bill Butler: It could be the assembly of five—who cares? The main point is that the lifelong learning inquiry should not be hampered. We should accept the convener's proposal in principle, subject to review.

The Convener: I will re-emphasise to the convener of the Health and Community Care Committee that, although we are always willing to assist other committees, we are not willing to jeopardise the timetable of the lifelong learning inquiry to consider this bill. If the Health and Community Care Committee wants us to meet its timetable, we can have a maximum of two evidence sessions of an hour each. Is that agreed?

Bill Butler: Could we put that on the agenda for the next meeting? That would allow us to discuss briefly the response and the position that has been reached. I am satisfied about talking to the bureau, but we should have further discussion.

The Convener: I take your point about the need for further discussion. I suggest that we put the matter on the agenda for the meeting of 5 December, rather than 28 November, because, as we heard earlier, the agenda for that meeting is rather clogged up.

We need to agree our position on how much time we are prepared to put into the bill. My view is that it would be enough for us to have two one-hour oral evidence sessions, given that we have been told that it must be done by the February recess.

Bill Butler: I suggest that we might agree to have a one-hour session with the qualification that another one-hour session can be added if that is necessary.

The Convener: I would be happy with that.

Miss Goldie: I want to put on record my concerns, convener. We have overlooked the local economic forums, which will crop up on 16 January. Everything that I have heard from different areas of Scotland argues cogently that the committee will have a responsibility to do something following on from what we hear on 16 January. For the life of me, I do not see how the committee can accommodate the bill. I want my position to be crystal clear. I am prepared to go further and say that I, personally, will oppose the bill, because it is an unacceptable inhibition of legitimate commercial activity. I am as clear in my mind as that. I do not want to mislead anybody by saying that I am anxious to take evidence or listen to anything else. The committee already has fundamental obligations.

The Convener: Absolutely. However, rightly or wrongly, the committee has already taken the decision to consider the bill. In fact, the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee offered to be the lead committee. We cannot renege on our agreement with the bureau. I went to the bureau in good faith and said that we would do it.

Would there be broad consensus if we were to limit the matter to a one-hour evidence session, unless it is absolutely necessary to extend that and an extension meets with the agreement of the committee. Is that your proposal, Bill?

Bill Butler: That is fair enough. We would really be agreeing to one session and would only have another one-hour session subject to the further agreement of the committee.

David Mundell: I am concerned that we would put in the time and yet be overtaken by events.

Mr Macintosh: I am anxious that you should go back to the bureau with something positive, convener. There are several concerns. If we are to make a constructive contribution to the bill—should it be taken forward in this form—I am not sure what a one-hour session would do. We would be caught between two stools; we would not have a constructive role as we do not have the time to do anything at the moment. Depending on what happens between now and February, I would be concerned that we would have to express our opinion on the basis of one hour of evidence and discussion, which would not be satisfactory. I am slightly concerned about the whole arrangement. At the same time, I understand that you have to make some positive comment. On that basis, I would be happy to agree to the proposal along with the suggestion that we may have to revisit it.

The Convener: I intend to say to the convener of the Health and Community Care Committee that if that committee insists—as it is entitled to do—on having our report on the bill by the February recess, it is likely that the time we spend on it will be only one hour of oral evidence and some consideration of written evidence. That will be all. There seems to be consensus in the committee that we are not prepared to sacrifice the time scale for our lifelong learning inquiry in favour of the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Scotland) Bill—or any other bill—at this stage and that that is the basis on which we made the offer to the bureau. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Meeting closed at 13:09.

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