ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE

Wednesday 30 January 2002
(*Morning*)

Session 1

£5.00

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ENTERPRISE AND LIFELONG LEARNING COMMITTEE
† 4ᵗʰ Meeting 2002, Session 1

CONVENER

*Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

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

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab)
*Brian Fitzpatrick (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
*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)
*Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*attended

WITNESSES

Dr Wray Bodys (HM Inspectorate of Education)
Frank Burns (Opportunities and Choices Working Group)
Dr Andrew Cubie (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework)
Kevin Doran (Opportunities and Choices Working Group)
Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland)
Paul McGuiness (Opportunities and Choices Working Group)
Professor David Raffe (University of Edinburgh)
Norman Sharp (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
and Joint Advisory Committee on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Judith Evans

ASSISTANT CLERK

Jane Sutherland

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

† 3ʳᵈ Meeting 2002, Session 1—held in private.

Scottish Parliament

Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee

Wednesday 30 January 2002

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:37*]

The Convener (Alex Neil): We are a bit short of members at the moment, but I have no doubt that our other colleagues will join us during the course of the morning. I know that travel difficulties are holding up some of them. We have two apologies. One is from Ken Macintosh, who has had to attend the Standards Committee this morning, not because he is in any difficulty, but because he is a member of that committee. The other apology is from Tavish Scott, who, I think, might be in difficulty in Shetland because of the Up-Helly-Aa night. Do not include that statement in the *Official Report*, please.

I remind members that we have a tight agenda this morning. We have five sets of witnesses and I have allocated half an hour to each set. I will not be able to go around the table, as I normally do, to every member and witness but, during the course of the morning, I hope to give every member the opportunity to come in at some point.

Lifelong Learning Inquiry

The Convener: I welcome Professor David Raffe of the University of Edinburgh, who submitted an extremely interesting paper as evidence to the committee. I ask Professor Raffe to say a few introductory words, after which I will open up the session to questions.

Professor David Raffe (University of Edinburgh): As your agenda is tight, I will try to keep brief my introductory statement. I believe that you want me to focus on the school and college interface. I will try not to summarise my paper, but will offer three introductory comments.

First, if we look at current developments in the school and college interface, we can say that a twin strategy is being followed, at least implicitly. One element of that strategy involves maintaining the relatively distinct institutional missions and identities of the school and college sectors; the other element involves bringing together schools and colleges in a unified system, particularly one that will offer relatively seamless opportunities for access between and progression from school and college and provide a basis for collaboration.

The second point is that both elements of that strategy—the distinctiveness and the unified system—are taking us in the right direction, but they raise a large number of issues, some of which are discussed in my paper—for example, how one incorporates the work-based route, the extent to which institutional diversity within each sector is desirable, how one keeps further education delivery as flexible as possible and how to manage assessment.

The third point is that constructing a unified system of this kind involves a lot of mutual adjustment and compromise between sectors whose natural instincts and interests tend to be diverse. My colleagues and I criticised higher still particularly, because of how its policy developed. There was a failure to establish an agreed and explicit vision that could have served as the basis for trying to reach agreements on the mechanics of the system as it worked out. Perhaps of more general relevance to this committee's work is the fact that it has not helped that schools and colleges report to different Executive departments.

Since submitting the paper, we have looked further at the development of higher still. My colleagues and I are working on a project that examines how higher still is developing. We have begun to ask whether the college sector is being marginalised within higher still and whether there is a retreat, in a sense, from what might be called the lifelong vision—to which higher still, at least on paper, contributes—to a reform that is largely

school oriented and school based. That is why I am glad that the committee is looking at the school and college interface.

The Convener: The issue of the interface between schools and universities has been the subject of controversy, which was initiated by Professor Joe Farrell of the University of Strathclyde over the past month or so. In terms of the interfaces between school and work, school and training, school and FE, and school and higher education, is there a need to simplify higher still grading?

Professor Farrell and others highlighted that they think that there is a problem because school students who go up to university need remedial classes. Do you agree that there is a need to look further into that issue? The issue is not entirely within the remit of this committee and this inquiry, but we are concerned about the matter, given some of the evidence that we have had.

Professor Raffe: There are two issues and I question how far they are related. One long-running issue is the extent to which schools achieve their standards. Going back 10, 20, 30 or 40 years, at any of those times one would find a similar set of arguments about standards being inadequate and schools failing to prepare people adequately for higher education or whatever.

The second issue concerns the nature of the higher still reform and what it is adding to and what it is trying to achieve. One should try to simplify higher still as far as possible, as it set out with an over-complicated model. However, it is equally fair to say that higher still is trying to achieve a unified system that, by its nature, has to be fairly complex. There is a trade-off, if you like, between how large a part of the education system can be covered and how many pathways and connections can be allowed for within it and the need for a simple system. The more ambitious one tries to be in scope, the more compromises one must make in simplicity. There must be some complexity, I am afraid, if higher still is to fit the different parts of the education system.

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): I was interested in your initial premise that

"Lifelong learning does not start at 16 or 18."

That made a shudder run through me. It made me wonder whether, after taking evidence for all these months, we are up a creek without a paddle and about to have all our solemn deliberations detonated.

An important dimension for the committee's inquiry concerns whether we should have regard to the responsibilities of agencies that lie outside of the committee's remit, such as the Scottish Executive education department or the

Parliament's Education, Culture and Sport Committee. From your submission, I infer that anything that we do within our remit will be a bit like a balloon floating off in the wind. Do our recommendations need to be anchored to something else on the ground as well?

09:45

Professor Raffe: That is a fairly general question, so let me try to latch on to specific aspects. My submission gave the example of inequalities. I know that the committee is concerned with inclusion and with the need to broaden access, but the evidence shows that most inequalities have set in by the age of 16 and sometimes long before. Other witnesses will have told you that participation in lifelong learning is strongly influenced by previous participation in, success in and experience of education.

In general terms, the most important thing that needs to be fed back down the system to the education department and to the Education, Culture and Sport Committee is that we need to try to design the content and structures of compulsory education and school education in a way that allows lifelong learning to build on them. Instead of simply emphasising content, we should emphasise the capacity for learning, the ability to take an interest in study and the ability to manage one's own learning. Higher still's structure is a promising start, because it provides a progression framework. People can enter that framework in the school system and—all being well—they should be provided with incentives to return later on, as and when it is convenient and appropriate for them.

Miss Goldie: So you are saying that the committee cannot examine lifelong learning in isolation from the education system, which is the other dimension.

Professor Raffe: Absolutely. The strategy must be to take account of what happens previously.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): I am particularly interested in your research on higher still.

Sorry, convener, must I declare an interest?

The Convener: My advice is always that if you are in doubt, you should declare an interest.

Rhona Brankin: I declare that I am currently on unpaid leave of absence from the University of Dundee.

There is some evidence to suggest that the higher still programme has advantages for youngsters who find it difficult to achieve within the school system. I am interested to hear more about that important evidence. You talked about higher

still lacking vision, but I understood that the underlying aim of higher still was to engage more youngsters in the learning process by providing a unified system that could take them through and encourage them to go on learning. I was surprised to hear you say that higher still did not have a vision; I thought that that was the main point about it. Will you talk a little about the evidence that suggests that higher still has benefited disadvantaged youngsters?

Professor Raffe: We are still in the early days of higher still. Part of my anxiety is that, although higher still is a unified system, strategic decisions are being taken on the basis of experience that does not cover the whole system. Implementation initially focused on the academic subjects within schools rather than on the totality of education that higher still will eventually cover. Following the exams crisis of 2000, many of the reactions were based on a rather narrow section of that system rather than on the system as a whole.

Subject to that, we surveyed all schools and colleges in Scotland, asking for their reactions to higher still. One of the questions asked which categories of students they thought had been most advantaged by it so far—the "so far" is an important rider. Students with learning difficulties and students with social disadvantage were the two categories for whom the system was considered most effective. Although it is outside the remit of the inquiry, I add that we were struck by the extent to which special schools reacted positively to higher still because it brought their students into the main stream of educational provision.

There may be countervailing disadvantages in relation to groups for which higher still does not cater so well. There may also be an issue about the extent to which higher still fits into the labour market and more employer-oriented provision. All the evidence so far is that it is improving provision for disadvantaged students, including students at school. One of the main target groups for higher still comprised the students who traditionally stayed on at school, took one or two highers and did not do well but for whom modules did not seem to offer a convincing alternative. That group is clearly doing better under the new system. The students take it more seriously, as do the schools and colleges. Both sides of that equation are important.

On the vision of higher still, we made the point that there was general agreement on what we might call the basic principle of higher still—opportunity for all, which was the subtitle of the original report on higher still. What was needed to achieve opportunity for all—or, to put it concretely, what is meant by a unified system—was not argued through in the same detail.

There has been a consultation about the extent to which assessment in the system needs to be differentiated between schools and colleges, although that is not the way in which the consultation has been phrased. That consultation has closed, although we do not know the result. We do not have clear agreement on whether our vision of a unified system makes such differentiation possible or whether it would be contradicted by an outcome that, for example, led schools to concentrate mainly on external assessment and colleges on internal assessment.

A lot of the detailed implications of a unified system and how particular measures would be required to achieve shared goals were not explicit in the report and were not agreed on. Part of our research suggests that there is agreement on at least some of the aims of higher still, particularly those to do with access, progression and equality. There is much less agreement on the measures that it tries to introduce in pursuit of those aims. The connection between the aims and the ends is less certain and less agreed.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I found your paper interesting. One of the complaints about our inquiry is that we have not covered different thinking. I was interested by what you were saying about participation. You say:

"Higher participation *per se* is not necessarily desirable."

Will you expand on that? A lot of the evidence that we have heard and a lot of the thinking in recent years has been about just getting more and more people into further and higher education. That has gone relatively unchallenged.

Professor Raffe: There are two elements to that. One is to point out that higher participation can involve students in a lot of extra cost and may not necessarily be intrinsically satisfying for them. In other words, it involves costs as well as benefits. Simply to prolong the process of initial education and delay the point of entry into the labour market is not inherently in the interests of the student or the young person who is going through that experience. A corollary of that is my desire to put more emphasis on the opportunity to return to education later on, rather than trying to get it all over with in one go at the beginning.

My view that the bigger concern is the distribution of participation and attainment rather than simply the level of participation is related to my comment about higher participation. On a global scale, Scotland's performance in higher education participation and attainment—particularly the completion of degree level courses—is very good, depending on how one measures it. Its performance is not nearly so good if one looks at the tail at the bottom of the achievement range.

Instead of aiming to get as many people as we can into higher education, I would prefer a target of getting as many people as possible up to what used to be Scottish vocational qualification level 2—or perhaps SVQ level 3—which is round about level 5 or 6 in the Scottish credit and qualifications framework. We should aim for something more inclusive and should put less emphasis on a type of education that does not manage to cater for half of the age group in any country.

David Mundell: You also referred to attempts to measure "university of life" learning opportunities, as they might be known colloquially. The final part of your submission talks about developing the learning opportunities that are provided by people's experiences. It states that

"a strategy for lifelong learning should incorporate a capacity to learn, including learning from its own experience."

Am I misreading that?

The Convener: What is your question, Mr Mundell?

David Mundell: How can such informal learning be developed?

The Convener: Where is the quote?

David Mundell: It is in the final part of Professor Raffe's submission, under the heading "Research and data".

The Convener: Which bullet point?

David Mundell: It is not a bullet point.

Professor Raffe: I was making the point that there is a need for a source of data that interrelates more formal experiences in lifelong learning with other kinds of experiences that people go through.

There is a general trend in education toward questioning some of the institutional boundaries that we place around the learning process. An important example of that is how workplace learning can interact more effectively with institutional—school or college-based—learning. Another aspect of the issue is the extent to which structures can build on and formally recognise prior learning, experiential learning and so forth.

I should qualify what I have said. I would be worried about moving to the kind of system and the kind of rhetoric that are based on the assumption that because we are all learning all the time, we need not worry about a formal structure. That is sometimes implied in some debates on lifelong learning. The logical conclusion to the argument that learning is everywhere is that we do not need to worry—if experiential learning is going on, why bother with a structure?

The education system needs to interact with other kinds of learning—informal learning that is outside the system—to take them more seriously, to respond to them and to complement them. We should not try to pretend that informal learning can serve the range of purposes that more structured learning and educational institutions and similarly structured arrangements can provide.

Rhona Brankin: I was particularly interested in the final part of your submission on research and data. I agree that there is a crying need for longitudinal research. I would be interested in the committee's discussing that and the need for evaluation to be built into any strategy.

Professor Raffe: I can only agree.

The Convener: That is excellent. I know that you must rush off. Thank you very much for your written and oral evidence, which have been helpful.

Professor Raffe: Thank you for your attention and interest in the matter.

The Convener: Our next witnesses are from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. I remind members who arrived late that I must be ruthless in keeping evidence-taking from each set of witnesses to half an hour, which means that we are not always able to accommodate every member who wants to ask questions. However, over the course of the morning, I will try to be as fair as possible and to ensure that every member is able to ask questions on a subject in which he or she has a particularly keen interest.

I welcome Dr Wray Bodys, who is the chief inspector in the post-compulsory education division of HM Inspectorate of Education, and Norman Sharp, who is from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. I ask both to make brief introductory statements.

10:00

Dr Wray Bodys (HM Inspectorate of Education): My paper does not represent the global activities of HMIE—it focuses on the work of one of five divisions in HMIE. The other four divisions deal predominantly with the work of schools and education authorities. The paper summarises all the aspects that the post-compulsory education division deals with, with the exception of our involvement in the quality assurance of new opportunities fund information and communications technology training for schoolteachers and librarians. The paper also focuses on the activity that I understand is of interest to the committee, which is the nature of audits; that is, who audits what in the higher and further education sectors. Given the fact that I am sharing this evidence-giving session with Norman Sharp, I have aligned the paper toward the areas

of work that overlap with the work of the QAA and those that relate to the QAA.

Norman Sharp (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and Joint Advisory Committee on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework): I will assist the committee's timetable. I have given an outline of the work of the QAA in my paper and I am happy to deal with questions.

Miss Goldie: What a fine fellow.

The Convener: I will kick off with a general question. An issue that has been raised quite often in the evidence that we have received over the past six months or so is that, throughout the higher and further education sectors and, in particular, in the area for which Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise are responsible, a significant number of organisations are involved in quality assurance. However, there is no system for ensuring consistency in quality assurance between the sectors, although I am sure that there is quality assurance within each sector. I ask both witnesses to comment on that.

We have received from colleges and others evidence of a specific consequence of the organisation of quality audits across the sectors. A college or a provider claimed to have been audited 28 times on the same programme, which is clearly a gross waste of public money. I know that Scottish Quality Management Systems is not present this morning—perhaps that is part of the problem. Nevertheless, I would welcome your comments on the need for a more consistent and streamlined approached to quality assurance across the sectors.

Norman Sharp: You highlight two critical issues. It is in no one's interests to have a wide variety of different systems that come from different directions, particularly as we try to provide increasing support to lifelong learning. We would sit alongside the committee if it were seriously to address that question.

The contexts in which providers operate are significantly different, but I do not want to overplay that difference. In the higher education sector— with which I am involved—the institutions are, by and large, autonomous. They are responsible for their own awards, although of course they are answerable to the funding councils for the quality of the provision for which public funds are used. We must address the context of autonomous institutions that have responsibility for the standards in their own degrees and awards. It is important that we address those circumstances when we develop our processes and that we do so in a way that sits harmoniously with and, where possible, shares outcomes and processes, with colleagues in other bodies.

In its briefing paper, HMIE referred to a current initiative on initial teacher education. A variety of bodies are involved in that initiative, including my organisation, which has responsibility for all the universities, the inspectorate—which has responsibility for teacher education—and the General Teaching Council for Scotland. The solution that those groups are working on is a form of collaborative quality assurance in which all the bodies work together to run a single process from which each different body can get what will satisfy its particular needs.

That is an important model for progress. I do not know the background to the case that the convener mentioned, but to have any programme audited 28 times is, most of all, an absurd waste of students' time. Resources that should be devoted to providing students with a quality experience are being diverted elsewhere and I would certainly not support that.

Dr Bodys: One of the reasons for inconsistency is the fact that accountability for quality comes down different routes. Ministers have responsibility for quality in schools under the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000. However, as Norman Sharp said, accountability in higher and further education goes through the funding councils. Each body has made its own arrangements to satisfy itself that delivery is as it should be in its area of responsibility.

Issues of consistency and overload are linked. The initiative in initial teacher education to which Norman referred is a good example of an area that has a clean slate—there is no published report on the quality of provision of initial teacher education in Scotland. We can therefore work as partners to design and create a landscape as we go.

In other areas, we have the established practice of SQMS visiting colleges to look at Government-funded training. The main body of colleges' work is funded by the funding council, which contracts with HMIE to consider that. We have taken some steps to resolve issues of consistency and to consider overload. Working with SQMS, we have established a body of joint documentation that colleges can prepare and that will suffice for SQMS and HMIE audits. That is not yet in its final stages because there are convergence initiatives focused on the enterprise and lifelong learning department and on the funding council. Those initiatives are looking further to develop that joint working.

There are moves to have part of the SQMS requirement—fair standards—accepted as being dealt with by HMIE college reviews. The SQMS audits could then focus only on aspects such as health and safety, which we do not deal with.

We have taken several steps; for example, we

have carried out a few experimental joint audits with SQMS auditors to see whether we can resolve inconsistency and overload by working together. The colleges told us that the systems are, in practice, sufficiently different that it would not make things easier for them if we carried out audits together. However, we are working towards the convergence of procedures.

Miss Goldie: I find it colourful that a chief inspector has a name such as Bodys. I thought when I saw it that that was auspicious and could be helpful.

When I read the two submissions, it struck me that in a country the size of Scotland that has a devolved Parliament and all the agencies that flow from that, there are a lot of quality and inspection systems. I listened to what was said about co-ordination, convergence and partnerships. Are the two separate systems sustainable?

Norman Sharp: That is a difficult question because it depends upon your definition of sustainable. Whatever systems were in place, they would have to be looking in different directions.

The universities in Scotland have already declared it to be important that they have prime responsibility in the Scottish education system. The universities must also—in terms of their international dimensions, overseas recruitment and recruitment from elsewhere in the UK—be seen to be quality-assured and to have had their standards gauged in the same context as other higher education institutions in the UK. Those dimensions must appear when higher education is quality-assured.

As to whether we can sustain two systems that are going in different directions, my answer is a clear no. Although we need to sustain provision that appropriately supports the different sectors in Scotland that have to work harmoniously, that does not necessarily mean that we must have a single organisation.

Dr Bodys: We agree generally. I made a point earlier about the situation in which we find ourselves. Because of historical and ministerial decisions, each of the various funding bodies has particular interests in and strategic aims for the provision to which they link. We must have a means of feeding back to those bodies secure, quality information on whether their aims are being achieved. A number of different structures could be employed to give general information that the system is achieving its aims. We have to work within the bodies that currently exist. We must also take account of the general public interest in the quality of provision, which involves reporting directly to ministers.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I would like to explore the budget a bit further, but from a different angle. I wish to explore not the university sector but the sector outwith it. From what we have heard, there is much more confusion outwith the university sector because it deals with work-based learning, skillseekers, training for work and so on, which all operate at level 4 and below.

The committee has been struck by comments that to any young person, to any adult returning to work or to anyone else in the system, what is important is that their qualifications are portable and of equal worth; however, we are finding that that is not the case. In other words, whatever level an individual attains, that person should be able to take his or her qualifications on to the next level; it does not really matter whether that applies to university entrance or not. People should be able to go on to the next step of the qualifications ladder whenever they like.

We have heard evidence that we need one funding system, one qualifications system, and one audit system that people believe sets and audits standards that are the same for all qualifications in a group. In that way, everybody would see the qualifications as having the same worth, which would address the problem. That is the background to my question.

People have asked for one audit system that encompasses everyone, so that everyone is subjected to the same scrutiny and standards. That would be most helpful. If that was the case, who should do the auditing, and would such an arrangement help the portability and credibility of the qualifications? We have heard time and again that the issue is about credibility and portability, as well as about quality.

Dr Bodys: There are two issues. The issue of qualifications is different, because that should be resolved through developments in the Scottish credit and qualifications framework, which the committee will hear about later this morning. The portability of qualifications is a matter for the bodies that design the qualifications and for those who are working on the associated framework. On the portability of qualifications, part of the issue is to make suitable provision available at a convenient place and time for the learner. That involves programme design and the availability and strategic coverage of subjects and levels by colleges, universities and other providers, which is a matter for funding councils and strategic direction.

On a unified audit system, there is no theoretical reason why processes could not converge. Although different inspectorates south of the border use a common inspection framework that sets out key principles, they continue to operate separately within that framework. HMIE and QAA procedures have many common features. In our work on the standing committee on quality

assurance in initial teacher education, Norman Sharp and I have drawn on those common features. We do not find that we are working in different areas in much of what we do.

10:15

Marilyn Livingstone: I, too, declare an interest. I am on a career break from Fife College of Further and Higher Education, where I was the head of the business school for 16 years before I joined the Parliament.

I accept part of your answer, but we have heard evidence about qualifications that do not have the same credibility as others. I am not asking about programme design or about whether a course offers an SVQ or a national certificate. I do not question the ability of bodies to design programmes. However, when a programme has been delivered and is being audited, people will say that some parts of syllabuses are more rigorously inspected than others, depending on where they are taught.

We have asked about and had presented to us the fact that, unless universities make articulation agreements, it will be difficult for some qualifications in the framework to facilitate transfer. We have been told that quality inspection is an issue for portability between levels. If a higher national certificate allows entry to second year at university, will an SVQ level 3—which is at the same level as an HNC, but is vocational—be equally acceptable? I may not have explained that very well.

Dr Bodys: Norman Sharp may be better placed to talk about the general issue of general and specific credit in the credit and qualifications framework, because that is most perceived as an issue in higher education.

Norman Sharp: Marilyn Livingstone's general point is correct. In our early work to develop the qualifications framework, we worked with colleagues from South Africa. The guiding principle that they used in developing their framework was the simple phrase "no dead ends". That has stuck at the back of my mind as we have developed our framework. A programme will have a series of ends in themselves, but a way forward should always exist, whether horizontally or vertically.

I accept some of the comments. A common quality assurance framework across the breadth of qualifications would be of enormous value and would remove at least the objective reasons for some of the transfer problems.

There will always be other issues. When I was doing my homework by reading *Official Reports* of previous committee meetings, I noticed that an FE

principal commented on the fact that programmes such as HNCs and higher national diplomas are a strength of Scotland's system. It is important to learners that such courses are ends in themselves and are vocationally relevant qualifications that take folk into the labour market.

Such qualifications also provide entry to higher education, but they cannot be loaded simply with that requirement, because that would deny the other. That is the other aspect of not being a cul-de-sac. As a previous witness said, the key element is ensuring that providers have appropriate bridging links. In my view, it is not appropriate for an institution to say that someone cannot enter with an SVQ or an HNC, for example. They must tell someone with an SVQ which route they can enter by.

Elaine Thomson (Aberdeen North) (Lab): We have received evidence from one of the universities concerning the portability of qualifications. The university told us:

"the previous practice of allowing HND candidates to enter the second or even the third year of our courses is now extremely rare."

Will you comment on that? What is happening across Scotland? Are people moving from further education to universities with that kind of qualification?

Norman Sharp: I cannot give you chapter and verse on that or cite statistics. My belief, which I think is well founded, is that that view is highly exceptional. The proportion of people with HNCs and HNDs who progress into universities is significant. Work that individual universities have done—Glasgow Caledonian University comes to mind as one that has researched the subject systematically—shows that the number of such students is not falling but increasing and that the performance of students who pursue that route is extremely good.

Elaine Thomson: So, you think that the number of students with an HND who complete their degree at universities is increasing.

Norman Sharp: My suspicion is that, overall, that is true in Scotland. The distribution is probably bimodal—it is increasingly common in some universities and not especially common in others.

Elaine Thomson: We have talked quite a lot about the fact that having a common framework for qualifications will be useful. We have not talked about industry-based qualifications, which are increasingly important in many types of work and rather more important than some formal qualifications. What opportunities are there to incorporate industry-relevant qualifications into the SCQF?

Norman Sharp: The potential for that is

extremely important. We are in the early days. We have to be careful because—going back to a previous question—the credibility of the framework rests, to a large extent, on the quality of the qualifications and awards that are placed in it. Therefore, it is in everyone's interests that we have an appropriate quality assurance structure around the framework. We are currently carrying out pilot projects with the Army and Community Learning Scotland to consider how work-based experience and qualifications can be placed reliably in the framework.

It is important that awards that are awarded in-house by Microsoft or the professional bodies—which are an increasingly important element of continued professional development—should be credit-rated and placed in the framework. They should be used by people positively in mapping out their lifelong learning strategies.

Brian Fitzpatrick (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab): I welcome the fact that the Army and Community Learning Scotland will be considered in relation to work-based learning. The new economy in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and elsewhere in the country, will depend on employers in the financial services sector being able to get employees who have strong core competencies. We all know what those competencies are. Employers are competing in a tight labour market and the skills that those people have add a premium to the jobs that they are looking for. Block release is a thing of the past. In this city, Standard Life and Scottish Widows train and accredit internally. When they cannot do so internally they do so externally, but in the private sector.

This is more a comment than a question but, because people do not stay in one job but move on to others, the core content, design and development of programmes, and their accreditation, is crucial. As Elaine Thomson said, if we do not consider that issue we will do a huge disservice to the Scottish economy.

The Convener: I know it was a comment, but would you like a comment on your comment?

Brian Fitzpatrick: I would like a comment, and assurances, on my comment.

Norman Sharp: You are absolutely correct and we are making headway on the issue. The University of Edinburgh and Napier University Edinburgh have made a healthy start on providing a credit rating service for exactly those kinds of programmes. That is in all employers' interests because it provides them with a supportive framework to assist them in designing a good learning experience. It is also, as you rightly suggest, in learners' interests. They will want to take recognised credits to other employers.

Dr Bodys: The issue is being taken account of in credit development. One of the sessions at the recent conference on the SCQF was taken by someone from the Chartered Institute of Bankers in Scotland, who made sure that we were aware of precisely that issue.

Rhona Brankin: I want to consider the interface between school and further education. You were here when Professor Raffe expressed doubt about the extent to which the system is unified. Will you comment on that?

Will you also comment on the forthcoming publication that will consider specifically the transition from school to further education for young people with additional support needs?

Dr Bodys: Responsibility for the review of education for work has recently transferred from the Scottish Executive enterprise and lifelong department to the education department. Both departments are aware of the issues. The inspectorate has a central role in considering the quality of provision. We have recently published documents to help schools to evaluate the quality of their links with industry. We focus on both the school and the college side. It is extremely rare to read one of our college reports and not find a focus on how the college links with local schools on provision and transition.

The document that will come out shortly reflects an inspection exercise that covered schools and colleges. It addresses the specific agenda of the transition from school to further education that the Beattie committee established; it sets out principles of good practice that we have found during inspections; and it presents general principles, gives details of case studies and provides materials to help schools, colleges and wider networks of interest to evaluate and improve their current practices. The provisional publication date is 14 February.

The Convener: St Valentine's day.

Rhona Brankin: Will the witnesses comment specifically on higher still and the extent to which it has provided a unified bridge between school and further education?

Dr Bodys: In schools and further education the use of national qualifications at access level is widening. I do not know the national picture to let me attest to how the growth of one specific qualification has impacted nationally, but we would be able to point to many good examples of provision that began in school and carried across the boundary to the local FE college. That involves work with national qualifications.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their helpful evidence.

I remind members who came in late that we are

being strict this morning and I will perhaps not be able to get round all the committee members in each part of the evidence session. It was agreed at our last meeting that I should be ruthless and I intend to keep that promise.

Brian Fitzpatrick: I apologise for being late; I had transport difficulties.

The Convener: That is okay.

I welcome Alex Easton, who is the head teacher at Falkirk High School, but who is here in his capacity as education convener for the Headteachers Association of Scotland. I clarify that there are two head teachers associations in Scotland—a fact that not everybody around the table might know. There is one for primary school teachers and one for secondary school teachers. Alex Easton, of course, as the name of Falkirk High School suggests, is from the secondary head teachers association.

Thank you for your paper. Would you like to make introductory remarks?

10:30

Alex Easton (Headteachers Association of Scotland): I will try to be brief. I expect that members will want to tease out some of the issues that I address.

I believe, and all head teachers believe, that schools are the foundation of lifelong learning and trying to address social inequality in participation and attainment. One of our key tasks is to get the attitude right at school so that it can be carried forward. We have not been fully successful in fulfilling that aspiration so far—the committee might want to ask me why I believe that. For example, a few weeks ago, the local press in Edinburgh pilloried schools, saying that 10 per cent of youngsters leave without a standard grade in English and Maths. That is true and is valid evidence of the fact that we are not succeeding fully to achieve what we intended.

There is a tremendous opportunity to support those about whom I, as well as many others, am most passionate—our poorest and least motivated candidates. I am not being complacent, but we are pretty good in Scotland at educating the able. An article on the front page of *The Herald* this morning confirmed that; the Programme for International Student Assessment put Scotland fourth in the world. I am not being complacent, but our youngsters who are doing highers are relatively well served. However, we have much to do at the other end.

Three things make me optimistic: the SCQF, which has been mentioned a few times; the lifting of the age and stage restriction in Sam Galbraith's time as Minister for Education and Children; and

the flexibility circular from Jack McConnell in his time as Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs. The committee might wish to come back on that. Those offer tremendous opportunities to enable flexibility in schools.

The biggest issue is perhaps not just the interface between schools and FE—I noticed that one of the questions was about that and I know that the committee is interested in it—but the blurring of that interface. That is a big factor.

There is a lot of good practice about, but there is still an enormous but. The vocational and the academic have still not achieved equal status. The academic is still the main orientation of mainstream education and is what I would say— without being complacent—we are good at. There is still a lot of ad hocery.

The interface between education and work and enterprise is an area to consider.

I hope that I have not been too brief, convener. I am happy for members to tease out anything that I have said.

Miss Goldie: I return to the thorny question of the link between education and the lifelong learning process. Earlier evidence suggested that we lack a strategy, clarity and cohesion. How does that affect the operation of secondary schools and the staff within the school in trying to motivate youngsters or inform them of what may lie ahead, if that is not the traditional route of higher education? Do staff in your school have to try to work their way through a general fog?

Alex Easton: There is a fog. I would like to tease out the opportunities that I was talking about. Life is relatively rosy for an able youngster who has researched, wants to be a doctor and gets five highers. What about youngsters whose home background disengages them from the educational process?

It is inevitable that I will refer to my school, but it is typical of what is happening. There are links, or ladders of learning, with the University of Stirling. We identify youngsters who have no family background of entering tertiary education, but who have the potential to do so. We had youngsters at the university on Monday. There are many links with local colleges; we had someone in to talk to the third year students about work simulation and colleges.

I want to talk about the impact of the SCQF. I was quoted in *The Times Educational Supplement Scotland* as saying that I think that standard grade will gradually die because other courses are sexier. I will justify that comment. The age and stage restriction was designed to allow schools to present standard grades in third year instead of fourth year. However, an unforeseen result of that,

which has turned out to be a big win for the SCQF, is that it will let us move the national qualifications programmes from fifth year to fourth year. Schools, including mine, have embarked on that in a big way. The SCQF has credit-rated the relevant national qualifications. There is no debate about whether access 3 is equivalent to the foundation level or whether intermediate 2 is equivalent to the credit level. That debate has been removed.

My school and many others are worried about youngsters at the lower end. Even turning up for the external exam is a barrier for some. Initiatives that were introduced in Michael Forsyth's day, such as modern language exams involving an oral element, were burdens for some youngsters. That has been addressed by Jack McConnell. Many schools, including mine, replaced foundation courses with access 3. That move involved discussions with principal teachers because access 3 is totally internally assessed.

On the inclusion agenda, we have supported-setting pupils, who are youngsters with moderate learning difficulties who, in the past, would have gone to non-mainstream schools. We have to cope with those youngsters every bit as well as we cope with other youngsters. National qualifications are helping us to do that.

Some of the new courses are intrinsically better, which is where the word "sexier" came in. For example, the home economics, music and art departments in my school have abandoned standard grades. The home economics department has replaced them with health courses, which are more practical, especially because of the equivalence aspect. Some courses, such as media studies, which is a popular and motivating course, do not exist at standard grade.

Jack McConnell's flexibility document is interesting. It lets schools try to offer more relevant and appropriate curricula without totally destroying the existing modal structure. Schools are interested in the move to entitlement with regard to modern languages.

The SCQF will become embedded in the software of career guidance. That will remove much of the ignorance that is still about. Steps to develop processes will be made. It will let youngsters who leave at Christmas carry forward credit. They will be able to use credit from an unfinished course at a further education college or take their credit into flexible learning or workplace learning programmes. There is a lot of scope for that.

The Convener: If I may interrupt you—

Alex Easton: I am sorry. Perhaps I went on too long, but the question went right to the heart of some of the things that I am passionate about.

David Mundell: You mentioned careers guidance in school. Do you think that the service is adequate, given that the world is more confusing than it was 10 years ago and people are faced with many more options? There is a view that as many people as possible should get into higher education. Is that view endemic in careers guidance in schools?

Alex Easton: I am a hard man to please, so I am never going to say that I am totally satisfied, but I believe that careers advice is more professional than it has ever been before. As you know, we have a contract with the local careers company and we negotiate what will be delivered. However, I would like further development of guidance staff as the area becomes more complex. That ties into McCrone—everything interrelates in schools. We may move to having full-time guidance staff, who are more highly trained. Much accessing of the rapidly changing information will be done through information technology systems. As I said, planning and progress are computerised. There is scope for the further professionalisation of guidance staff, although the service is probably better than it has ever been before.

David Mundell: What about the pressure to get people into further and higher education?

Alex Easton: That is relatively ad hoc. In my area, things are quite good—there are strong links between schools and Falkirk College of Further and Higher Education. The pressure depends on where in Scotland one is. I would argue for a more systematic strategy. One of the most desirable—and oversubscribed—courses is sports science. We can lay down pathways from schools, just like the pathways from further education to higher education, and youngsters can achieve ends that guarantee them places on such courses.

The point that was made earlier about universities was interesting. The best universities at laying down pathways are ones such as Paisley, Napier and Glasgow Caledonian. What do they have in common with the universities that are less interested? There could be more systematic movement into FE colleges. It is not assumed that higher education is the automatic step for everybody. We must increase the status of vocational as opposed to purely academic courses, to match what happens in many other European countries.

David Mundell: We have taken evidence from people, particularly those who were in further education, who said that their experience at school had put them off learning. We have heard confirmation this morning of the view that school is the foundation for the path through lifelong learning. Where do things go wrong for those people who, as we have identified, are in

difficulty? Is it when they come into secondary 1? Is it too late then? Do pupils enter S1 about whom you think, "They won't go into lifelong learning," but something happens in the school process that changes them? What is it about school that can change someone's approach to lifelong learning?

Alex Easton: For many youngsters, the thing that goes wrong in their life is not necessarily to do with school. The community school approach has enormous scope in relation to this issue. "Lifelong" means that education goes right down the way, so early intervention is important. Unfortunately, experience so far of otherwise excellent Government initiatives tends to show that those who have shall be given more. The evidence is that early intervention favours those who are relatively favoured already. That is shown with supported setting and the rest of the raft of initiatives. We raise the able even more and do not close the gap.

Children's experience is holistic; school is part of that. I hope that we will have a curriculum that they can buy into, to give them subjects that they like and that are delivered appropriately. I hope that children can achieve success, because nothing succeeds like success. We could even ensure that youngsters who leave after fourth year, where the foundation was not appropriate, find success. Building on that is what this issue is really about. The community school approach is one of the more exciting ones. We are getting a large amount of money—about £600,000 next year—to roll out community schools, which involve health and family aspects and community workers.

I have been arguing that we must get the curriculum right in our approach to teaching, but the issue is broader than that. It is about deprivation and support—sorry, but this is a bit of a hobby-horse of mine. Community schools offer genuine hope for breaking the cycle that, whatever strategy we choose, those who are well favoured will gain even more.

Rhona Brankin: My question follows on from that and is about the notion of parity of esteem. You have talked about how higher still is working in practice and how it is being used as a replacement for some of the youngsters who struggled to achieve at foundation level. Is higher still beginning to break down some of the barriers, change attitudes and address the issue of parity of esteem?

10:45

Alex Easton: Absolutely. Last year, we put our toes in the water and in quite a number of subjects went down the route of replacing standard grade. We reviewed that—we do thorough reviews. I will ask you a rhetorical question—I know the answer

without asking you. How many departments want to step back this year and go back to standard grades? The answer is none. A raft of other departments wants to take higher still ahead. The proof of the pudding will be how many of our youngsters attain five foundation level equivalents to standard grade. The SCQF says that access 3 will count.

My gut feeling, from the feedback that I have got, is that youngsters are attending the courses more. School attendance has improved from what it was four years ago. I hope that, in a year or two, I will be able to give you hard numbers about attainment, but we are not there yet. All the signals are that—without being a magic wand, because there is no magic wand—higher still is a step in the right direction.

Elaine Thomson: I want to ask about youngsters who are at the bottom end or who are disaffected with school. My question goes back to the idea of community schools and building better interfaces between school and work, school and FE and school and higher education. Various people have spoken to the committee about trying to develop some of the new initiatives in that area. I am familiar with one such initiative in Aberdeen. Are there any particular difficulties in putting such initiatives together? Funding can be difficult, because it comes from different pots. Some of it may come out of community-school-type funding, whereas other parts may come from a local enterprise company. One of the colleges or universities that gave evidence said that it was trying to develop initiatives to take people into tertiary education, although—as you said—that had never been considered previously and there was no real funding structure to facilitate it. What is your comment on that?

Alex Easton: In general, school funding is complex for the reason that you have given—we have moved to devolved school management. That is a wonderful success story, as the review shows. People such as me are becoming slick at budgeting, but hypothecated funding makes it much more difficult. There are many hypothecated pots, which exist for different purposes, as you know. There is still much ad hocery. For example, my school has been using the alternatives-to-exclusion money to set up units. The school is not a new community school but, interestingly, two of our linked primary schools are. I have been buying in the family worker from one of those schools to work with identified vulnerable youngsters. We have been trying to buy in extra places. We have thought of reducing the number of courses by one or two for those youngsters while increasing vocational input through the college.

What we are doing is still largely ad hoc. It may be too ambitious, but perhaps there should be a

national strategy framework debate about the issue. It is frustrating to see good practice in one place and not to see it—"replicated" is not the word, because every school and community is different—learned from and used, where appropriate, in a modified way. I do not know whether that answers your question, but I was attempting to.

Brian Fitzpatrick: I want to talk about the interface with the higher education institutions. How hard are you pursued by the ancient universities in relation to your able but poorer youngsters? On widening access, do you think that we should recommend incentives for those universities or penalties against them? Should we do so for the newer universities, too?

Alex Easton: It is a whole society thing. In the west, where I came from, the University of Glasgow was the real uni and the University of Strathclyde was still the tech.

The Convener: I should warn you that a member of the governing board of the tech is here.

Alex Easton: Those days are gone, however. That was the perception 20 years ago. There is an inherent quality almost of snobbery in our society. I interview every one of our 60 or 70 youngsters who apply to university through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service and am particularly interested in why youngsters apply to do medicine. When they are asked why, they reply, "Because I can apply." They say to themselves that they are bright and will obtain five good highers and think about what they can buy with those highers rather than ask themselves whether they are motivated to be doctors. There is a constant cycle of bright and able folk applying to do courses such as law.

My son is finishing his fifth year at the University of Edinburgh. He is doing a masters degree in engineering, which is as tough a degree as there is. However, the status of engineering still has not changed.

The issue is complex. It is not just that the older universities deliberately poach. There are generational beliefs about the relative status of degrees and jobs.

Brian Fitzpatrick: How hard are those youngsters pursued? What links do the universities have? Those links speak a lot about universities' widening access programmes. You are a practising head teacher.

Alex Easton: The universities that you mention are not guilty of pursuing harder. In truth, the other universities produce more glossies and television adverts, perhaps because they think that they need to run harder in the marketplace. I cannot say that the older universities are more guilty of

pursuing than the other, newer universities.

The Convener: The SCQF diagram shows access level 1 and access level 2. What do those mean?

Alex Easton: Access 1 and access 2 courses in a normal mainstream school are designed for youngsters with profound difficulties. Often, there are no detailed courses. A great aspect of the system is the top level up to masters degrees. Access 1 is for youngsters with profound difficulties.

The Convener: Are you talking about learning difficulties or severe learning difficulties?

Alex Easton: The youngsters could have severe physical handicaps, for example. I do not like using hierarchical phrases, but those levels are probably for youngsters who are not, even with the inclusion agenda, reaching main streams as things stand.

The Convener: What about access 3?

Alex Easton: That is equivalent to foundation standard grade. However, it is interesting that we are going to use some access 2 courses for youngsters with moderate learning difficulties who are coming through our supported setting.

The Convener: That was helpful, excellent and enjoyable. Thank you very much. Andrew Wilson and I cover the Falkirk High School area and we know that the school has a deservedly high reputation.

Alex Easton: Staff in all Scottish schools tend to work their socks off. Falkirk High School is not special; our work is replicated in other schools. I would not like members to go away thinking that my school is better or worse than others.

The Convener: It is not as good as Kyle Academy in Ayr—I am only kidding.

We are running ahead of time and I have received a request for a five-minute comfort break.

10:53

Meeting adjourned.

11:01

On resuming—

The Convener: It is 11 o'clock, so we should resume.

I remind members that we are running a tight schedule this morning. There is half an hour for each evidence session, so questions and answers should be brief and to the point.

I welcome Paul McGuiness, who is from Renfrewshire Enterprise but is representing the

Scottish Enterprise national network this morning; Kevin Doran from the Scottish Executive enterprise and lifelong learning department; and Frank Burns, who is principal of Ayr College but is here this morning in his capacity as a member of the opportunities and choices working group.

Kevin Doran (Opportunities and Choices Working Group): I will make a few brief introductory remarks and we will certainly try to keep our answers brief. Our submission has been circulated to the committee. It sets out the remit of the opportunities and choices working group, which is to develop models of more integrated, non-advanced further education and training provision and funding. The purpose of the group is to inform the Executive's thinking about training for young people. The group agreed to an 18-month time frame in which to do that. Its first meeting was in November 2000. We are due to submit an interim report to the Executive by the summer.

The group has a broad representation of stakeholders. Some group members have expressed frustration that the group has not moved more quickly in coming to conclusions and submitting them to the Executive. There is a broad consensus in the group about the issues that need to be addressed but there is no consensus about the operational solutions. That is the motivation for the pilot projects that we are engaged in. We want to find proven and tested solutions to some of the issues and frustrations. The pilot projects are important. My colleagues may have the opportunity to say more about them during the meeting. We hope to commence our second set of pilot projects in February. Strong opinions have been expressed in the group about issues and solutions, but research evidence does not always exist to support the opinions that are held, hence the need for tested models.

I will conclude with some general factual information. In 1999-2000, there were 23,000 16 to 19-year-olds in full-time, non-advanced further education. Currently, about 35,000 people are engaged in the skillseekers programme. The number involved in the skillseekers programme has gone down by about 3,000 over the past three years.

The headline numbers hide a huge shift in what is happening with skillseekers. In 1998, there were 8,000 modern apprenticeships in the skillseekers programme, whereas now there are more than 19,000. That growth in the number of modern apprenticeships has been followed by a drop-off in the number of other skillseekers training programmes. On 14 January, a report was published on modern apprenticeships that held information from 170 employers and 270 apprentices.

I conclude on this point. It is important that the opportunities and choices working group remembers that, although there is one system of training for young people, there have been significant changes over the past three years. There is a dichotomy between modern apprenticeships and other skillseekers training programmes. Therefore, if the group considers making any recommendations, it must recognise the impact that such changes would have on the system as a whole.

Marilyn Livingstone: I met members of the group during our case study visit to Fife and Dundee, and I thank the witnesses for coming along today.

I will take us back to the reason for our inquiry. We are all aware that Donald Dewar introduced the opportunities and choices initiative in 1999. Three key issues are raised in the paper that was submitted by the opportunities and choices working group. They are the need to:

"Improve transfer and progression

Create more integrated courses of FE and training

Extend qualifications funded through Skillseekers".

We are interested in those issues and have taken a lot of evidence on them from people throughout the sectors. I ask the witnesses to bear in mind my personal interest in those issues. I say that as background information to my questions—I have two or three—as we must stick to what the initiative is about. The pilots have a budget of £500,000. We now have an opportunity to examine an issue about which the committee is concerned.

My first question is probably for Paul McGuiness. Could you explain the research and design requirements for the pilots and say how they will be tested for significance against the elements from your paper that I mentioned?

Kevin Doran: The second round of pilots will start in February. Three pilots from the first set of pilots are up and running. Paul McGuiness may be able to give some more detail, using the themes that you mentioned.

Marilyn Livingstone: It would be helpful if Paul McGuiness would talk about the three pilots that are running.

Paul McGuiness (Opportunities and Choices Working Group): In three of the pilots that were started last year, we are hoping to create more integrated provision between further education and the work-based route. Six pilots were originally earmarked, of which three are up and running. The pilot that is based in the Falkirk area is intended to offer individuals who are participating in full-time college programmes for

national or higher national certificates in engineering the opportunity to go into the workplace and to participate with employers in working towards the modern apprenticeship standards. We hope that those individuals will gain not only a knowledge base but competence within the working environment.

Another pilot, which was based in Edinburgh and the Lothians, was a customised pilot that examined the skill requirements for a particular employer in the electronics sector. The employer worked in partnership with a college to customise a college programme to develop knowledge in and understanding of that sector. The aim of the pilot was to enable individuals to progress within their workplace by giving them more knowledge and understanding and making them more able to compete for promotion and so on.

The third pilot is in Renfrewshire, which is my area. Whereas the other five pilots tried to integrate work experience into the full-time education route, the Renfrewshire project was trying to do something different by targeting people who were in jobs at a level that prevented them from growing—they were not able to do higher-level qualifications. In partnership with the local college, we designed an academic programme that developed the individuals' knowledge, so that they had the opportunity to aim for a higher level of qualification, rather than being stuck at an inappropriate level. That pilot integrated work experience with a further education programme.

Marilyn Livingstone: Are you aware that many of those elements have already been tested? I am aware of that fact from my previous career. Are you taking on board the massive amount of work that has been done? Why are five pilots running although that work has been done?

My next question is on a crucial part of your evidence. What is being done to test the flexibility of choice of qualifications for individuals and employers? That question is about your pilots rather than the Scottish vocational qualification framework. If you are not testing that flexibility, you are missing one of the key themes.

Paul McGuiness: We are fully aware of the work in the rest of the country. The aim of the five pilots—there were six originally—is to test the opportunity for individuals to progress to higher-level qualifications. That takes us into the realms of the higher national certificate and the higher national diploma. In some parts of the country, we are restricting that to the HNC. For the first time, we are trying to test out the potential to integrate HNC programmes with the appropriate work-based qualification.

We take other work into account. That work has

been fed back to the opportunities and choices working group in a series of papers that map existing pilots and work, for example in Fife, against the five pilots to discover where the gaps are.

Marilyn Livingstone asked about flexibility of choice. We learned a number of lessons from the first round of pilots, one of which was that we should test from the outset the demand and the requirements of employers and individuals. The evaluation shows that in the first round of pilots we did not consult. When I spoke to Marilyn in November, she highlighted a number of issues about choice and flexibility. In December, the opportunities and choices working group was asked to buy into the bones of a fit-for-purpose model that would involve working closely with employers and individuals to discover what they want.

Around 15,600 employers participate in skillseekers modern apprenticeships. We believe that some things are working. We wanted to examine the employers' claim that the qualifications do not meet their business needs and that there is a high drop-out rate of young people from the skillseekers programmes. In December, the opportunities and choices working group agreed to develop the fit-for-purpose model. Papers on the model will be presented to the local enterprise companies and further education colleges so that they can give their ideas on how they will work on a sectoral basis with groups of employers to develop training programmes that are fit for purpose. Those programmes will take into account employers' training requirements and the knowledge requirements of the job.

Marilyn Livingstone: I am still concerned. I am certain that HNCs have been integrated with SVQs for a number of years—that is nothing new. Choice is choice is choice; we do not have to continually run pilots on choice. I agree that we must do more work with employers and consider the core skills, but, as the committee has said, 16 to 18-year-old skillseekers are not the only group of people who do not have the choice of the full range of SQA qualifications. That is the starting point. I would have major concerns if the opportunities and choices working group did not accept that.

We do not need pilots to tell us that we need choice. When we undertook the case study in Fife and Dundee, we met 24 employers and 24 students, who told us that they want choice. Many of them would stick to the SVQ route and that is fine—I would support that. However, they want choice and the evidence for that fact already exists. I would like us to progress that and see how it works and I would like to be convinced.

My following question is for Kevin Doran as well. Why did the whole budget go to Scottish Enterprise? The major player in the area is further education. It has the big budget and a lot of knowledge especially about qualifications other than SVQs. What partnership has there been with the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and what partnership is there going to be?

11:15

The Convener: I am conscious that other people want to ask questions. We need to keep things fairly tight.

Marilyn Livingstone: I will make that my last question.

Kevin Doran: On the budget, £500,000 was given to Scottish Enterprise this year on the understanding that in disbursing that money it would take a steer from the opportunities and choices working group.

The Scottish Further Education Funding Council is now part of the working group. At the meeting in December, all the members of the working group were invited to make proposals for the next round of pilots. We have extended the hand of partnership to the members of the group and beyond, through the LEC network, particularly for the second round of pilots.

The working group would agree that the fundamental issue is choice for young people. However, one of the lessons that has come out of the pilots over the past year is that although young people and employers have choice, they do not always make the same choice. The difficulty with the pilots is that there are good data from many small and medium-sized enterprises showing that what they want is work-based learning. However, the experience from some of those pilots shows that young people clearly want the college model.

Choice is fundamental, but sometimes there is an imbalance when we try to resolve the different choices that stakeholders make.

Miss Goldie: I have two brief questions. How many members of the working group run a business and employ people?

Kevin Doran: There are two employer members: Morag McKelvie from NEC and Doug Wilkie from the Federation of Small Businesses.

Miss Goldie: Does Mr Wilkie run a business or is he an employee of the Federation of Small Businesses?

Kevin Doran: My understanding is that he runs a business. He certainly seems to.

Miss Goldie: My second question follows on from some of the remarks that Mr McGuiness made earlier, which suggested that the working group might have had a better chance of making positive progress if the business presence had been greater. Many of the difficulties that you are encountering are practical difficulties over workplace provision for employee training and learning.

Have you formed a judgment on what tends to work better in the workplace? Is it when the employer and employee collectively look for a provider and entrust the employee to that provider in the abstract hope that he or she will emerge better informed, better trained and with better lifelong learning? Alternatively, does it work better when the employer and employee can procure a package suitable to their business? Which is the better model?

Kevin Doran: I agree with your first point about employer involvement in the working group. I have made the point that the group has struggled to get good employer involvement. I am grateful to the employers who are involved with the group.

We have tried to supplement that involvement in any research work that we have done. In the modern apprenticeship research, 170 employers were interviewed. We have also commissioned research from the University of Glasgow training and employment research unit under Alan McGregor; that research will engage 250 employers mostly from small businesses. It has not been easy to get people to give of their time to be involved in the group.

Paul McGuiness: The employer is crucial to the process. The employer and the individual have to sit down and decide what skills are required to do the job and what is the best way of getting those skills delivered. They might do that in partnership with a supplier or with a further education college. The design stage is crucial. The employer must first understand what skills are required for the job. We face the challenge that some employers do not fully understand those skill requirements. It helps the process if individuals are advised, perhaps by a supplier. It is crucial that the employer and the individual take ownership of the learning process. The supplier's role is to act as an intermediary in that process and to help with off-the-job training and on-the-job training or assessment. The training will take place in the workplace.

Miss Goldie: Realistically, if that works well, the employer or the business could become a training provider.

Paul McGuiness: That is absolutely right. A number of employers throughout the country have taken greater ownership of the training process via skillseekers modern apprenticeship models. They have become approved centres in their own

right—centres that are accredited by the SQA. Many of them have even progressed to being Investors in People organisations.

It is right to build the infrastructure within a business as far as we can. Some businesses do not want to do that—they would prefer the services of a third party. There are fantastic benefits for employers in taking greater ownership.

Elaine Thomson: The need to support employers in developing skills or in understanding properly what skills they require has been made clear on several occasions. Should Scottish Enterprise look at that area? In particular, should it provide the SME sector with more help in carrying out the kind of skills needs analysis that you are talking about? There needs to be consideration not only of the impact on job design generally, but of the kind of training and qualifications that are required to support that. I appreciate that it must be difficult for an SME to carry out that process.

Does the Scottish Council of National Training Organisations or any of the national training organisations assist or get involved with the opportunities and choices working group? Those sectoral organisations are heavily involved in the skills needs issue.

Kevin Doran: SCONTO is not involved in the working group, although we have a good relationship with Anneliese Archibald and other members of SCONTO, largely as a result of SCONTO's work on modern apprenticeships and frameworks for modern apprenticeships. It is unlikely that anything is going on in the working group of which SCONTO would not be aware.

Several pieces of research have referred to SMEs and the identification of skills needs and skills gaps. I am not sure that there is an easy answer to the problem. As you will be aware, Future Skills Scotland—which obviously has a national perspective—is in place in Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The enterprise network is the obvious route for practical assistance for SMEs in skills development. The issue has not come up very much in discussions in the opportunities and choices working group, but it has emerged in some of the research.

Brian Fitzpatrick: Do the pilot projects receive funding from the Scottish Further Education Funding Council and Scottish Enterprise?

Paul McGuiness: The pilot projects that are under way receive funding from both organisations. The colleges are allowed to draw down money from SFEFC for participants who are pursuing higher national certificates. If an individual becomes registered for a work-based qualification, the enterprise network will contribute towards that.

We want to simplify that process in the development of the new set of pilots. Scottish Enterprise will take total control of disbursing the money that is allocated directly to the relevant employer, further education college or training supplier. One pot of money will be used to try to simplify the process.

Brian Fitzpatrick: Is that to simplify the pilot or is it because of the implications for roll-out?

Paul McGuiness: It is to try to simplify the pilot to allow us to test things. For roll-out, we would need to undertake further evaluation and to learn from certain things.

Brian Fitzpatrick: Would the double funding have implications for a realistic roll-out?

Paul McGuiness: Yes.

The Convener: It is fair to say that the report on the case study expressed some disappointment at the time that it has taken to get even this far with the very great vision of Donald Dewar, which he announced in 1999.

This morning, I received a letter from Craig Thomson, who is the principal of Glenrothes College. He raises a number of points, two of which I would like to raise with you. He says:

"My concerns are that, despite the availability of substantial funding earmarked for Opportunities and Choices from the Scottish Executive to Scottish Enterprise National in the current financial year, centrally initiated work to address these themes has been narrow in its focus and very slow to develop. Furthermore, where progress is evident in locally based initiatives, this is not being built on."

Kevin, would you like to comment on that?

Kevin Doran: The decision to proceed with the next round of pilots was taken at a meeting in December by the opportunities and choices working group, of which Craig Thomson is part. Craig was at that meeting as were other representatives from Fife. When the decision was taken, group members were invited to come forward with any proposals for new pilots or developmental work. We have had no reply to that offer.

I understand Craig's frustration. However, it is not for the opportunities and choices working group to make funding decisions about the development of FAST-TRAC in Fife. That was not in the group's remit.

The group met first in November 2000 and has had five meetings and a seminar since then. It has worked on a number of major pieces of research— on FAST-TRAC and modern apprenticeships, for example—as well as the pilot projects. I think that the group has informed the Executive's thinking over the past 13 or 14 months. A report to the Executive is scheduled for the summer. The group had given itself a time scale of 18 months for that,

so it will be on time. I have to be honest and say that, on reflection, I wish that I had pushed to start the next wave of pilots sooner. However, I say that with the benefit of hindsight.

I sympathise with some of Craig Thomson's sentiments. However, the group has clearly decided to pursue some other pilot projects. The offer is still open to any member of the group.

The Convener: Craig Thomson mentions FAST-TRAC and, in particular, talks about

"changes in the administration of SVQs being implemented at national level as Scottish Enterprise National moves to new arrangements with the LECs"

and

"a reluctance on the part of the Scottish Executive and Scottish Enterprise National to engage with the Fast Trac Partnership as they develop new, pilot work under the Opportunities and Choices banner."

He says that those factors

"make the continuation of Fast Trac in its developed form very difficult."

You say that people are not presenting proposals, but he says that you are making it difficult for him to present proposals. Where does the truth lie?

Kevin Doran: As you know, the meetings of the opportunities and choices working group are a matter of record. It is therefore a matter of record that a decision was taken in December to proceed with the new pilots, it is a matter of record that an invitation was made to everybody round the table to submit proposals, and it is a matter of record that we have had no response.

The Convener: If we leave aside Craig Thomson's specific points about Fife, it must still be disturbing for you if you have had no responses from anywhere in Scotland.

Kevin Doran: It is certainly alarming that, having gone round the group in December to ask about new pilots and employer-focused pilots, we have not had a response. Paul McGuiness will be able to give you the up-to-date position.

We have gone beyond the group and have used the enterprise network to identify employers and get projects up and running. A timetable is in place. Since we met some committee members in November 2001, a timetable has been adopted to try to bring forward those pilots to February. We have had to push that, which has been a lesson from the first round of pilots. When we have conducted tests, people have not rushed to us to confirm some of the assumptions that we made about what the marketplace wanted. That has been another lesson from the first round of pilots.

11:30

Elaine Thomson: Does that mean that some of your assumptions about what the marketplace is looking for are incorrect? Is that one reason why few people are coming forward? Are what they want and what they think that you offer mismatched?

Kevin Doran: That could well be the situation. We will have to reach a view on that.

Elaine Thomson: We are in a transition period. The population of young people is falling and the number of unemployed young people is falling, which is tremendous, but skill shortages are beginning to appear all over the economy. I hope that the design of the pilots will focus sharply on known skill shortages.

Kevin Doran: I agree. At the meeting in December, we examined whether we should target sectors and whether we should target SMEs as opposed to large organisations. You are right. The message about skill shortages comes through from employers and employer groups. We would like to address that in the pilots.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I take it that you cannot comment on FAST-TRAC, because you have not received the independent evaluations.

Kevin Doran: The independent evaluation will be made public in February. The publication date is only weeks away.

Mr Macintosh: Is what is being done in Fife being done anywhere else in Scotland? FAST-TRAC is piloting such work for you and you could cut out much work by funding its pilot. It is a large-scale project.

Kevin Doran: My colleague Frank Burns has more experience of the FE sector.

Frank Burns (Opportunities and Choices Working Group): The work is not being done explicitly. The advantage of FAST-TRAC is that it takes a collaborative approach. The evidence on its operation is not conclusive. FAST-TRAC has been successful with college attendees and the college model, but it has not been successful with the employer model and skill shortages, which some members touched on. In a sense, the project has brought Fife up to the national average.

FAST-TRAC has done some interesting work, but, as far as I am aware, it has not done much developmental work. I am interested in what is happening, because I am examining qualifications and delivery. As someone said, the model has double funding, which may cause problems, because it involves the funding council. At this stage, the model seems to be win-win. Perhaps when that stops, FAST-TRAC will move on. It is an interesting experiment.

Other colleges are doing things individually or on a loose collaborative basis, but nothing is formal. My college has introduced placements as part of its HNC programme. The difficulty lies in getting firms to subscribe, but that is developing in HNCs in e-commerce, electrical engineering, mechatronics and engineering. All those models might be adopted by colleges individually or in groups, but not nationally.

The Convener: Later, the committee will discuss its reaction to the evidence. Speaking for myself—I am not yet authorised to speak for the committee—I feel that a longer session will be required, because the case study report, the external evidence that we have received formally and informally, and some answers to questions have generated unease about an apparent lack of sufficient progress.

I suggest that the committee revisit this issue in the next few months, because it is important. The vision that was outlined by Donald Dewar was very exciting but, three years later, that vision is nowhere near being realised. We ought to concern ourselves with that. I thank you for your written and oral evidence, which has been extremely helpful.

We move to our final witnesses. I welcome Andrew Cubie from the Scottish credit and qualifications framework and welcome back Norman Sharp, in a slightly different capacity. Andrew, would you like to make some introductory remarks?

Dr Andrew Cubie (Joint Advisory Committee on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework): Indeed. Thank you very much for inviting me here this morning.

As the chair of the joint advisory committee on the SCQF, I am the only independent element of the framework apart from the development officer. The framework and the partnership are unique. I was enthused when I was asked to take over as the chair, last year. It is important that those of us who, in other roles, have spoken rhetorically about the importance of lifelong learning, roll up our sleeves and do something practical to bring it forward for the benefit of Scotland. I pay tribute to the work that was done before I appeared: the seeds of the SCQF came from the Garrick report and were developed vigorously by the development partners—the QAA, the SQA and Universities Scotland—in the period leading up to late summer last year, when I took over as chair.

The aims of the SCQF are quite simple: to help people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime and to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential. I lay stress on each of those words. We see the framework very much as a

climbing frame, not a ladder. It is about personal development, economic advantage and creating the culture of a learning Scotland. I, and my colleagues in the initiative, believe strongly that that must be facilitated through recognising the progress that has been made. The framework will also allow employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to one other and how each of them can contribute to the improvement of skills.

I draw breath at that point. It has become evident to me, as I have become involved in the framework, that one of the major features that we must focus on is ensuring that our language, which is quite complex, can be understood readily by the wider community. That wider community is made up of the individual, employers and those who are employment. It is clear to me that, in a culture that has a great ability to create acronym goulash, part of the role of the SCQF, as it develops, and part of the role of the joint advisory committee that I chair, is to facilitate the language.

At a conference in December, at which the convener spoke, we launched the framework to the wider community. The response to that launch has been positive. However it is right to recognise that the joint advisory committee has some 18 representative bodies on it, over and above the development partners. We are aware that we need to broaden that base to move forward. That is an area that I could pick up on if there are any questions.

We can be proud of the initiative that has been taken here in Scotland. We have made more headway than colleagues elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Indeed, our current working model for a framework structure is regarded as the best presently available in the European Union.

Miss Goldie: I refer to the SCQF diagram that has been supplied to the committee. Is anything currently being offered at SVQ level 5?

Dr Cubie: I invite Norman Sharp, who is more familiar with the detail, to respond to that.

Norman Sharp: There are management qualifications at SVQ level 5. Some interesting work has been going on at the University of Glasgow, where SVQ level 5 has been related to the university's master of business administration structure.

Miss Goldie: At the bottom of the diagram is a footnote, which says:

"Professional Development Awards and Scottish Progression Awards are under review and do not appear in the table. They will be included in future versions and are explained in the following section",

but the following section is—

The Convener: Just being given out now.

Miss Goldie: Ah—it is coming.

In any case, it might be useful if we could have some expansion on that. This relates to the earlier line of questioning about the direction in which we are going in relation to incorporating the work-based qualifications into the whole framework for the future, which is very exciting.

Dr Cubie: It became evident to us at the conference to which I referred that there is pent-up demand, on the part of professional bodies, to identify ways in which continuing professional development can be brought within the framework. Such learning does not sit within the framework at present. Having created an implementation group to progress the application of the framework, I believe that we need to form a professional bodies forum into which we can bring all the professional bodies that wish to participate.

We had two active workshops at the conference. It is clear that the framework has come at a timely moment for employers and professional bodies to identify ways in which workplace learning can be credited. It is a question of ensuring that workplace learning, when it is credited, may be taken up the framework. At any point, an individual can be progressing in the framework upwards, but also laterally, in terms of the skills that they are acquiring. We need to ensure that the professional structures can accommodate that flexibility.

Let me give you a cogent example of the progress that is being made. The SCQF is not a regulatory framework, but a descriptive one. It is about persuading those who participate that they should recognise the qualifications and the work that is being done by other bodies.

I was delighted to learn that the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh now offers a diploma in medical informatics, which is being taken as a pilot for one of the professional qualifications in the framework. The Royal College of Nursing was quite eager to participate, but, having cast its eye over the diploma, it did not think that elements of the modules were rigorous enough. A dialogue ensued between the two professional bodies so that those modules would be acceptable to both of them. That shows the complexity of interchange that is needed in the framework, but the joint advisory committee, which I chair, allows such facilitation to happen. Through the implementation group, that is happening increasingly quickly.

Mr Macintosh: The different levels of accreditation within the education system can be barriers as well as awards for achievement and rewards for success. That is the case at various levels throughout the system. The diagram before us is an admirably simple map, but I imagine that it must hide some problems. Where are the main points of resistance? I do not want to answer for you, but does the difficulty lie, for example, between the older established universities and the further education colleges? We have heard that there is a problem there.

Dr Cubie: I give credit to the way in which Universities Scotland, representing all the higher education institutions—including ancient and new universities—has worked within the framework to date. My experience so far suggests that there are no real issues in the HE sector. Ken Macintosh is right to suggest that there are issues between FE and HE. However, part of the structure of the framework will allow FE-HE relationships to be developed. I have been involved in trying to encourage greater fluency in the framework between FE and HE and I have not encountered any difficulty in the principle—as ever, the devil is in the detail. That is why we must get on with implementation and address that detail.

11:45

Norman Sharp: I support Andrew Cubie's comment about the universities welcoming the framework and actively participating in its development. They have all agreed that, by 2003-04, all students entering universities in Scotland will enter programmes that are fully contained in the SCQF. That is a big commitment, and the next, big, stage is how we operationalise it—how we ensure that it makes a significant difference.

We have discussed the link between FE and HE, which is an important issue. FE participation is very important in Scotland—a significant proportion of the people in Scotland who experience higher education do so through the further education colleges. The research evidence is clear: for disadvantaged groups, the stepping-stone approach that is provided by the path to HE through FE is extremely important. FE is a key fulcrum in the SCQF. The FE colleges are rooted in their communities, whereas the universities, because of their circumstances, find it more difficult to be rooted in local communities. I do not mean that as a pejorative comment. Partnerships have everything to offer us.

We have been working on such issues for some time. About a month ago, we set up a new working group on the links between FE and HE. We want to develop that work to build on the good practice that we find in pockets in Scotland and spread it more widely throughout the country.

One of the other interesting issues is the role of the ordinary degree in Scotland. The Garrick report made reference to the possible need to revisit the role of the ordinary degree, which could provide us with a vehicle that might more easily facilitate work-based entry routes and, as an initial step, some FE-HE articulation routes. We have set

up a working group that is considering development of the ordinary degree.

Mr Macintosh: In the past, universities have used qualifications as a hurdle to be overcome, rather than as a reward or a mark of achievement. It sounds as though you think that that problem can be can be surmounted and that we can use the framework to reward success, rather than as a barrier to progression.

A further concern is the very start of the learning process and the people who get no qualifications whatsoever. Formal qualifications to get into the learning system lack attraction for some people. Are you trying to address that?

Norman Sharp: We have close links with Community Learning Scotland, through which we are trying to address that important issue. Indirectly, that leads us to the question of how we help individuals to value learning and to articulate it in a way that others can value.

The whole area of helping people to reflect and get experiential learning accredited is important. We need to move significantly forward in that area over the next few years in Scotland. The SCQF does much to help make the supply side much more responsive and to help individuals who have no qualifications, but perhaps have been fully engaged in community work, to find out how they relate to that framework. However, we need to create a system to enable an individual to get support and advice to do that. We have good models in mind.

Dr Cubie: Level 1 of the framework begins with learners who have severe and profound learning difficulties. They are as important an element of the framework as those at level 12, who are taking taught doctorates. I emphasise on behalf of my colleagues that the framework is about giving parity of esteem to each individual's progress. I surmise that we all agree that the first step in a journey is the hardest one, so beginning level 1 is as creditable and meritorious as anything that happens right up to the top of the scale.

David Mundell: I return to the initial point—on how much progress has been made. What percentage of current courses are covered by what you are trying to do?

Dr Cubie: Norman Sharp might be able to give a specific answer to that. We appear before you to describe work in progress. We have come through the conceptual stage. We made clear at our launch in December 2001 that we are now into the implementation stage. Resource issues are attached to the process. If I am not asked about that matter, I may introduce it into the discussion.

As you gathered, the SCQF initiative is floating in the air; it is a concept that we have managed to move to its current position with the good will and support of development partners who contributed time and effort to doing that. I believe strongly that that is the way to go forward. I do not believe that we need to create an SCQF bureaucracy. We need more resources for issues that we might come to, but the main issue is facilitating the development partners and the other participating stakeholders to contribute more to move us forward more swiftly.

You have already heard from Norman Sharp about time scales for Universities Scotland and the SQA. We need to move the SCQF strategy forward with sufficient speed, but not so rapidly as to lose any of the participants. We need momentum to move the strategy forward, but the strategy will succeed in the Scottish context only by working consensually with its key stakeholders. I suppose that my key role is to ensure that the strategy continues in that way. Perhaps Norman Sharp can give you the percentage figure that you asked about.

Norman Sharp: We cannot give you an accurate statistic at the moment. Many of the higher education institutions are virtually on board now. All are on the journey and they will all be fully within the SCQF by the beginning of session 2003-04. Part of the higher national review process will bring SQA awards within the SCQF. The timetable for spreading that throughout all the SQA awards is being worked on. We are at the beginning of a longer journey in the area of professional bodies and other employer-based courses.

David Mundell: To summarise, you say that the issue is resources and not the need for a big stick.

Dr Cubie: Absolutely. I would not add to that. No sticks are involved. Participating organisations are having interchanges to resolve issues. That takes time. Individual organisations need to devote the time to make that happen—which is an issue. There is also a central issue about promoting the strategy so that the SCQF provides in Scotland, as our submission says,

"a national vocabulary for describing learning opportunities."

The Convener: We need to keep it tight.

David Mundell: How will the strategy overcome the complexity of qualifications and allow the individual learner and business to understand them? The SCQF diagram mentions Scottish credit accumulation and transfer scheme points. If I were to ask members of the public, they would not have a clue what they were.

Dr Cubie: We acknowledge that. The convener might agree that, at our conference last December, there were one or two baffled faces

among the group that is engaged in the SCQF. It is complicated. We produced for that conference quite a detailed document as our introduction to the SCQF; the next stage is to produce a simplified version that is readily understood. I need to take advice on how best to convey that information throughout the wider community. That requires resources.

We need to develop our website and to have more support in our development directorate, which is limited at the moment. We need to be more specific about our cash requirements for the central purpose of communicating the message and to look to the support that our development directorate and other partners can give.

Norman Sharp: Describing the past is complex; describing the future is simplicity itself. The credit point will be exactly the same whether someone is at the early stages of school, in a further education college, in a professional statutory body or learning anywhere in Scotland. A common unit of credit will run through absolutely everything. One of our important goals is to try to bring about that simplicity.

Marilyn Livingstone: I am mindful of the time and will keep this brief. The SCQF is an excellent piece of work; when the committee is happy with something, it is worth saying so. It is a first class piece of work and everybody involved is to be congratulated.

The evidence that we have taken has shown that there is a real need for people to be able to zig-zag up the ladder, not go up one individual route.

Once the SCQF is up and running, how will we be able to monitor it to ensure that people are able to take the first step on the ladder and are treated with parity? You might want to comment on that.

The framework is crucial and—as the convener is saying, central—to one or two of the issues that the committee is considering. I do not know whether the committee agrees, but I would like to be kept up to date with developments. If we are going to make the framework central to what we are considering, we need to be informed regularly about where you are. It is simpler for me, because my background is in further and higher education, but it is important to keep the committee closely in touch with what is happening. That is my request.

Dr Cubie: You can take that as a given, convener. We would be absolutely delighted to do that. I thank Marilyn Livingstone for her earlier remarks, which relate to those before me, rather than me.

Parity of esteem comes from the robustness that is brought about at each level, which is an essential part of the framework. It is essential that

there is recognition that in the zig-zag, appropriate credit is given for learning. The challenging elements come when one gets further away from the rigid structure. The framework has to be quality assured so that nothing in it slips under the net.

Elaine Thomson: I want to follow that theme: what happens when we get away from formal learning structures.

The Scottish university for industry and learndirect Scotland have been set up. We hope that that will be an increasingly important way in which people are brought into learning. What interaction is there between you and SUFI? Is it your intention, for instance, that all the courses that are accredited and publicised via learndirect Scotland will offer qualifications that fit in with the SCQF?

Is it your intention that any learning provider anywhere in Scotland—if they have their course properly accredited and quality assured—should be able to be plugged into the SCQF? That becomes particularly important for industry-based qualifications that are relevant to a particular employer or type of work.

Dr Cubie: The answers are yes and yes. SUFI is part of the joint advisory committee, as is Community Learning Scotland. It is important that such stakeholders and partners be part of it and see that the learning processes in which they are involved are accredited and part of our progress. I am certain that, unless we sustain that commitment, we will not succeed.

12:00

Elaine Thomson: I know that it is early days and that it would be better to ask my next question a couple of years from now, but what sort of feedback do you get from employers, particularly those that are outside the professions, when you talk to them about that approach?

Dr Cubie: Having been the chairman of the Confederation of British Industry in Scotland, I consider the employer view among others. Employers are represented on the joint advisory committee. The feedback that we have is very positive. The approach is about trying to clarify an extremely complex structure that is bewildering to the individual and, frankly, often bewildering to the employer. Given the volume of learning that is undertaken in the workplace, if employer and employee can see how the approach adds to the longer journey, as we keep describing it, that is of immense value to the employer in, for example, skill improvement and morale. Employers support the SCQF strongly.

Brian Fitzpatrick: I echo Marilyn Livingstone's sentiments. The SCQF is an example of the

Government giving successful strategic direction and is therefore to be welcomed. I welcome what you have said about providing a common vocabulary. When talking with other witnesses this morning, I have touched on the interface of workplace learning with industry-accredited courses, particularly in relation to the financial services sector. That is a good model to use in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Although I agree not only with the journey but the direction of travel, I am keen to know that you are making an early pit stop with the financial services sector. It provides 10 per cent of our jobs and more than 10 per cent of our earned income. Most training in the sector is done privately, either internally or by external providers. If we do not capture that level of activity, a window of opportunity in an expanding part of our economy will quickly be lost.

Dr Cubie: I agree entirely. One of my roles is to proselytise. As you have probably gathered from my attitude, that is not difficult as I am committed to the SCQF. I have meetings with the Chartered Institute of Bankers in Scotland and the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland in the frame within the next three days. We will discuss developing links and remaining close to them. I envisage that replicating itself in our pulling together a professional body forum around and alongside the joint advisory committee to ensure that professional bodies are catered for. Financial services will obviously be part of that.

Rhona Brankin: I welcome what you have said about wanting to unravel the system and simplify it for the learner. The committee probably agrees that it is a jungle. Perhaps that is the wrong term, but it is difficult for learners to find their way through the maze that exists at the moment. I am heartened to hear you talk about the need to work with SUFI and learndirect Scotland. How important is the role of careers Scotland in disentangling the system for the learner?

Dr Cubie: It is as important as any other. This is about the journey taking us in certain directions. In career terms, that too is vital. The sources of information that are available to learners and employers must be made more comprehensible. The information must be delivered from fewer sources to ensure that, if there are different areas of information, they are hyperlinked and not contained in boxes. That is more for the committee than for me. It is part of what we are trying to create within SCQF. We are trying to create a common language and a common platform for such an exchange.

Norman Sharp: Some of the best examples that I have come across of advice being given in that context have combined opportunities for people to get their informal experiential learning accredited

with education and career guidance. For individuals, those are often part of the same set of decisions at a particular point in time.

Mr Macintosh: I have a small point of clarification, which follows on from David Mundell's point about the carrot-and-stick approach. A suggestion was made about encouraging people to sign up to the SCQF. In evidence to the committee or in discussions, it was suggested that two conditions be placed on the money that is received by the publicly funded education bodies: that they sign up to the framework and that their credits are part of the system. As you said earlier that you are seeking a different sort of consensual approach, perhaps such conditions would be unnecessary and undesirable. What is your reaction to the suggestion?

Dr Cubie: My personal reaction is that we need to travel as swiftly as possible while keeping everybody behind the SCQF. Some form of financial encouragement or condition of grant would sit perfectly happily with the language that Norman Sharp and I have used. Indeed, it would be encouraging. It is important that whenever lifelong learning arises, the Executive—across the range of its departments—demonstrates a commitment to and an encouragement of the SCQF. I say frankly that, from where I sit, all policy development is tied into the SCQF. In terms of making progress, it is the best game in town.

The Convener: I thank Andrew Cubie and Norman Sharp. I think that you can sense from the committee, and from the evidence that we have taken, that everyone sees the SCQF as central to the future lifelong learning strategy. Andrew, you indicated that you would like to make a couple of general points at the end of the session.

Dr Cubie: I will stray slightly from the SCQF. I look forward immensely and with bated breath to publication of the committee's report. I am not alone in that. I know from my prior involvement in the subject that it is immensely important to have the opportunity to set a longer-term strategy that will act as a guide to education and that is linked to the economy that we think Scotland will have in five, 10 or 15 years' time. I am delighted that the committee has the opportunity and the challenge of writing up what that will be.

I have one further point to make. Members will have to forgive me if I have not read sufficiently the submissions that were made to the committee. I make this comment, principally as chair of the court of Napier University. All higher education institutions in Scotland are looking vigorously overseas for students. The committee should examine some of the issues around the funding implications of that and the nature of the societies that overseas students join. The opportunity of having overseas students in our educational

institutions brings a diversity of culture to our institutions. In addition to the financial benefit to the institutions, two distinct issues are involved: the reach that Scotland has in attracting overseas students and the diversity of experience it gives to our own student body.

The Convener: I again thank Andrew Cubie and Norman Sharp—your evidence was much appreciated.

Scottish Development International

The Convener: I remind the committee that we are in public session for the next item, which is consideration of the draft paper about Scottish Development International. The draft paper is the follow-up to the successful evidence-taking session we had at Scottish Enterprise—indeed, the visit that we made to Scottish Enterprise was successful.

The draft paper is in line with the formal and informal comments that were made. It is for the committee to agree that the paper sets out how we want to proceed on the subject of Scottish Development International.

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): My only comment is a pedantic one. Under point 2, I would like us to give ourselves some distance by adding the word "broad" to the words "support for the strategy".

The Convener: Is that agreed?

Marilyn Livingstone: I am quite happy with it as it is.

Brian Fitzpatrick: We could call it "all-party support".

The Convener: Any other comments? Is everybody happy with that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Item in Private

The Convener: Do members agree to take item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

12:09
Meeting continued in private until 12:52.

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